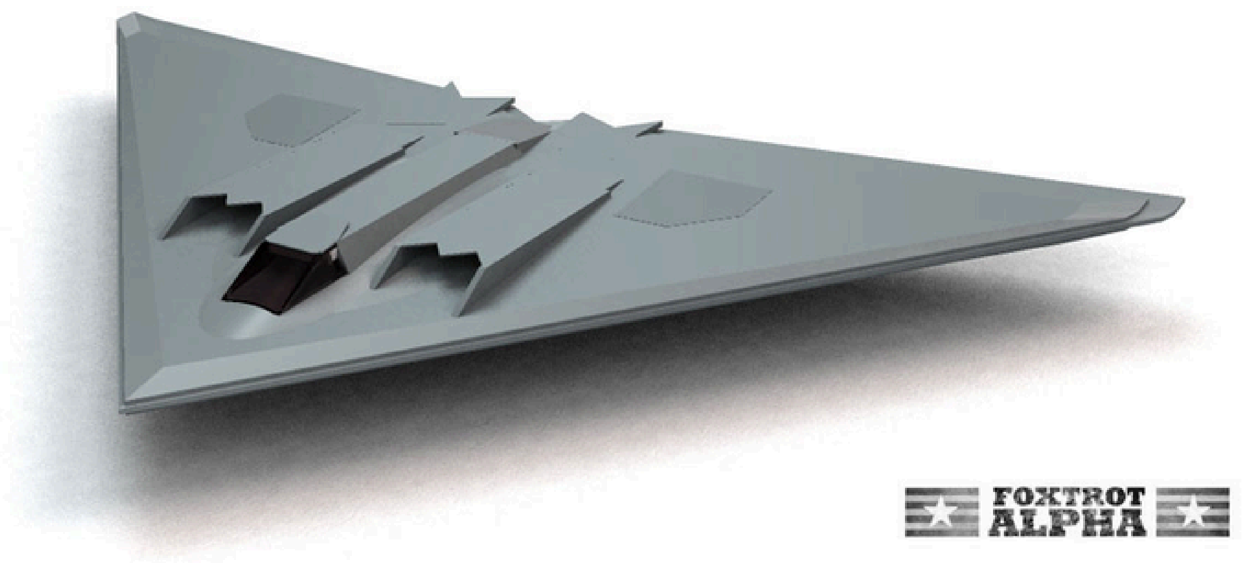
JALOPNIK

BEYOND CARS

So What Were Those Secret Flying Wing Aircraft Spotted Over Texas?

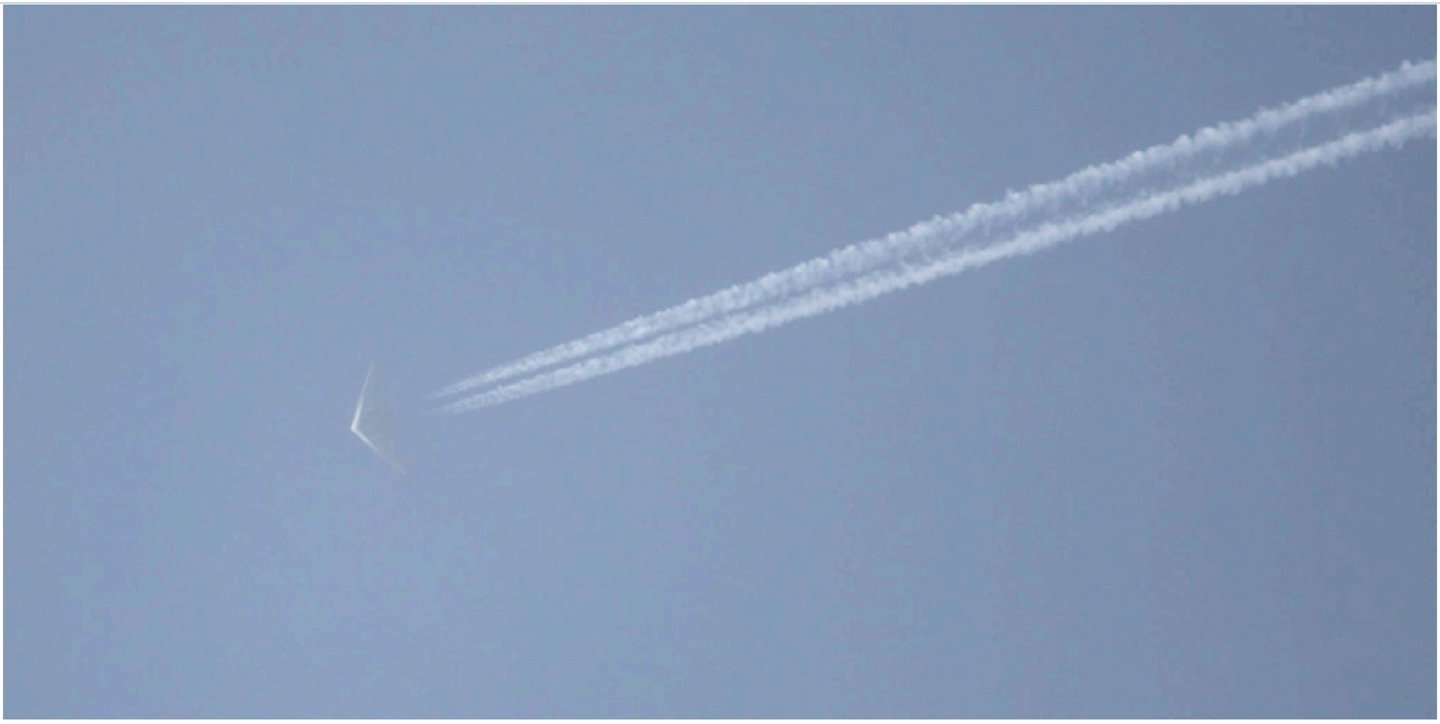
BY **TYLER ROGOWAY** | APRIL 25, 2014 9:00 AM EST



So what exactly were those mysterious "flying Doritos" booking it high over the Texas Panhandle, and more recently, Wichita, Kansas? Nobody may be able, or willing, to give you a definitive answer, but *Foxtrot Alpha* is here to lay out all of the possibilities of what's almost certainly one of the military's big secrets.

In the skies above the U.S. there have been multiple reports of what are referred to as flying wing aircraft traveling overhead. None of the images seem to match up to anything anyone has seen before — at least no one with ability to talk about it. In the first part of this analysis we'll focus on all the manned possibilities.

What We Know



This new photo, taken in Wichita, Kansas by photographer Jeff Templin a few weeks ago, shows a triangular planform twin engine aircraft with some detail. His report of the sighting states that the aircraft was executing s-turns high overhead, with no sound coming from the craft at all. If the mystery jet was trying to slow down, or at least increase its travel time over a finite distance, which the execution of s-turns usually signify, the engines may have been at idle, or at low power settings, thus the sound may have been greatly diminished. This is especially true on an aircraft that most likely has its engines mounted deep inside its fuselage and its exhaust set above and inward of the aircraft's trailing edge. There is also the distances involved, probably around five miles or more straight up, which can greatly dissipate sound.

(C) Steve Douglass
webbfeat@gmail.com

Meanwhile, Steve Douglass, the original spotter of a trio of flying wings that were making their way over Amarillo Texas, and many others now watching the skies over America's heartland, recently spotted a trio of B-2s Spirit bombers executing what appeared to be an exact reenactment of the original sighting over a month earlier.

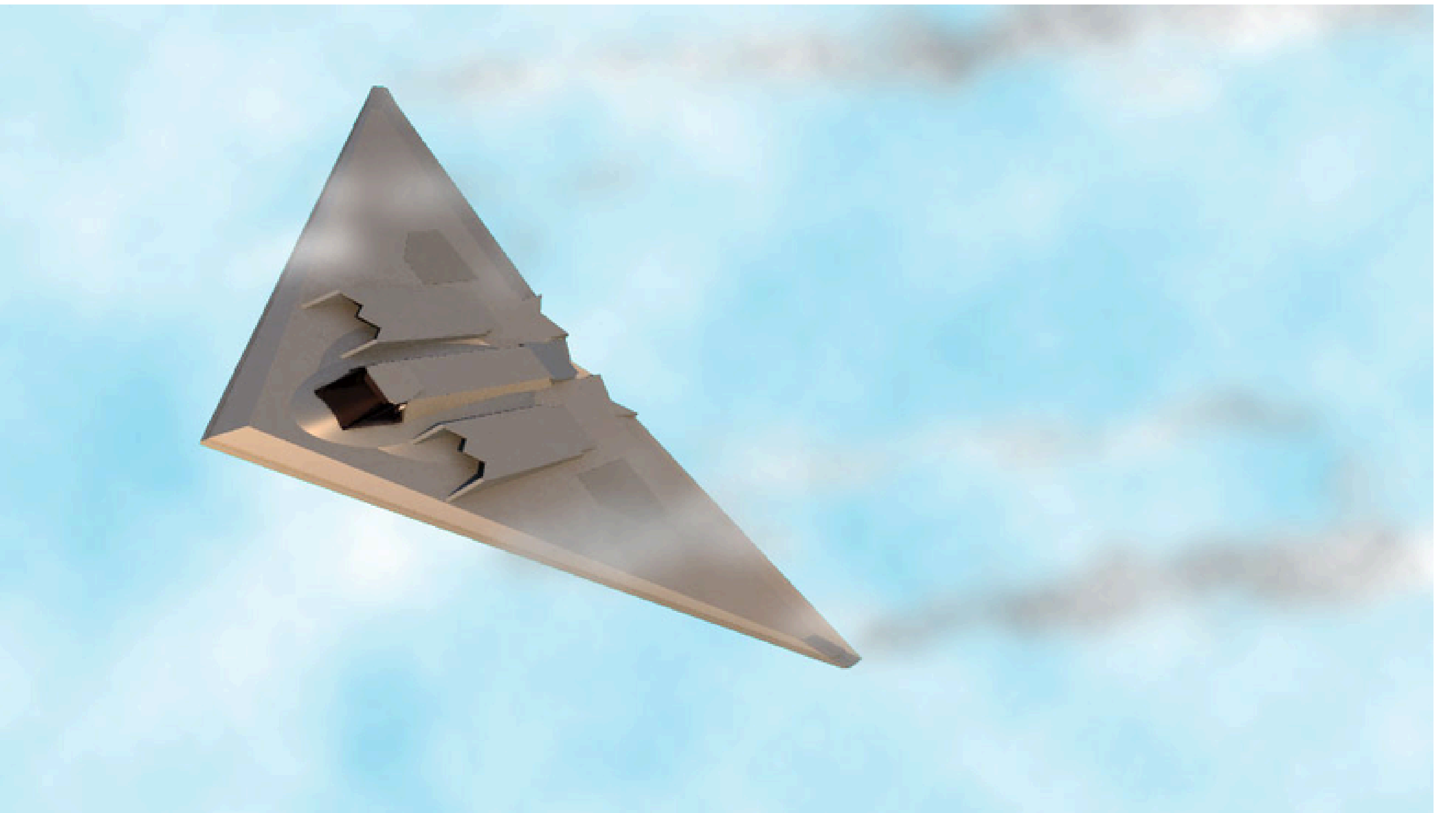
The whole B-2 reenactment was truly strange display for multiple reasons. First off, seeing a trio of B-2s in relatively close formation is a rare sight to begin with, and Steve, who monitors the airspace around his hometown thoroughly, attests to this. Second, the fact that these B-2s appeared after Steve's original sighting made national news is even stranger.

What is even more odd, and possibly telling in its own right, is that the public affairs officer at Whiteman AFB, where all but one of 20 B-2s live (aside from any getting work done at Plant 42 in Palmdale CA or temporarily deployed), unequivocally denied that their aircraft were flying over Texas at the time of the original flying triangle formation sighting. Maybe this original denial was premature as it seems likely that the DoD now wants to confuse and/or discredit Steve's account of the original event by presenting the same exact activity by a formation of very unclassified B-2 Spirits.

This tactic of disinformation, or outlandish coincidence, may have backfired, as this follow-up event gave Steve and many other sky watchers a great control variable for which to gauge their prior experiences and photographic evidence against. Additionally, even though many people saw the recent B-2 flyby on high, and photographed it accordingly, nobody looked at their images and saw unknown flying

Now that we have another possible photo of the aircraft in question, one that is more detailed in nature than those taken by Steve and his friend Dean Muskett, as well as the fairly lame B-2 formation stunt pictures, both of which add to the validity of Steve's original sighting, let's take a look at the possible theories as to what these shy aircraft may or may not be.

Theory #1: It was a hoax and/or an illusion and these aircraft do not exist



This theory would state that the pictures, personal accounts and radio transmissions posted on Steve Douglass's website are a total or partial fabrication. For a layman just looking at these pictures, which are arguably not of the best optical quality, I could totally understand how they could say that they are the result of a creative Photoshop session.

Additionally, Steve has chased secret projects for some time, he even shows us a picture of his personal command center or sorts in his house, dedicated mainly to intercepting military radio transmissions and researching military technology, especially of the classified type. Steve has actually been active in the more shadowy areas of military aviation for some time, he even wrote a book that is called *The Interceptors Club and the Secret of the Black Manta,* a novel that appears to be about an aircraft similar to the one spotted. The book's very title does have a slight reference to what the aircraft depicted in the pictures he posted could be (we will get to that in a

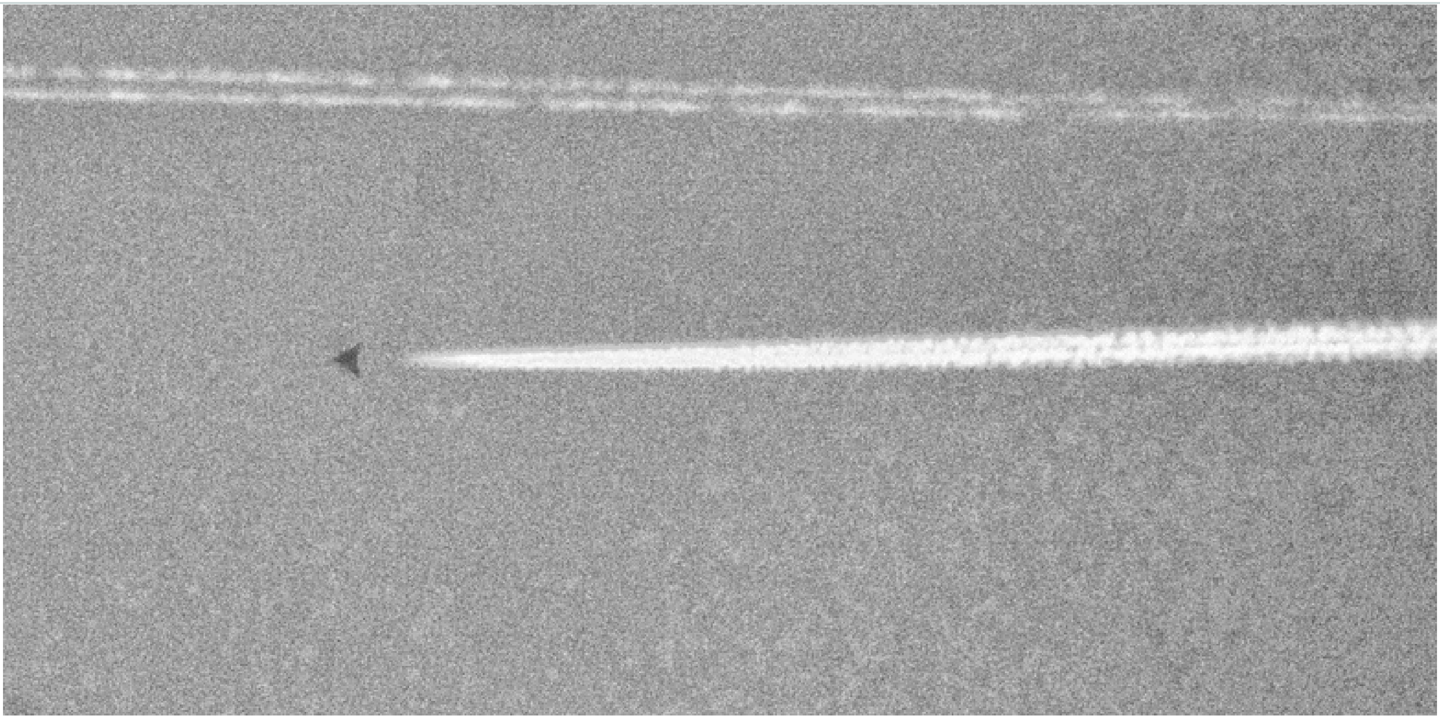
Dean Muskett took at Amarillo International Airport on March 10th.

Taking all this into account, could this whole event have been some sort of marketing strategy for Steve's book by creating a story that mirrors the subject of the novel? Or could this be some sort of meta-like research that Steve is conducting into the reactions of the aerospace journalism world to a rare "spotting" of an aircraft not yet disclosed to the general public? At face value these are all relevant possibilities, but I don't think they are the most likely ones.

Steve Douglass has done some great in-depth reporting on his website and for many other mainstream publications in the past. Over the years I have occasionally been in contact with him about topics for which our interests overlap. I have always found that my interactions with him, albeit limited in nature, as well as his written work, give every indication that he is a honest, thoughtful, and highly intelligent guy who cares a ton about aerospace issues. Additionally, I know that others in the small world of defense journalism also share my impressions of Steve. As for his book, it is all but free to enjoy, so I doubt any monetary motive is large enough for him to ruin his reputation by executing some ridiculous ruse or charade.

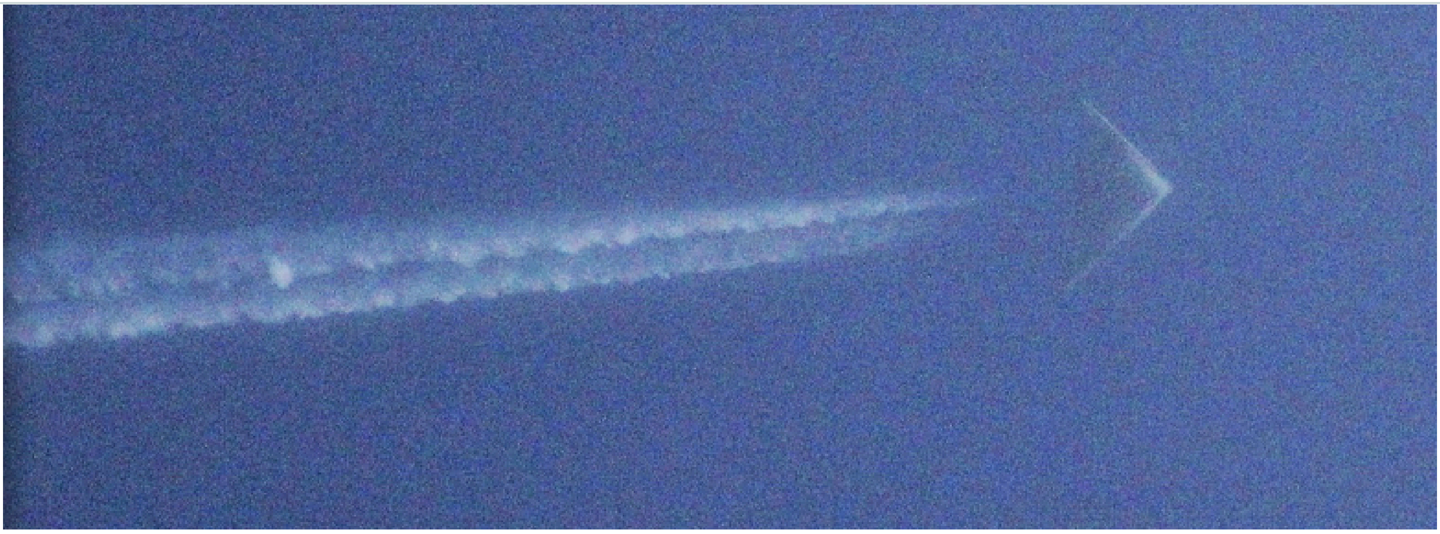
There are a ton of loons out there that claim this and that about classified programs. Some believe every airliner in the night's sky is a secret alien spaceship, or that everything the government does has a deeply classified subplot, and that every airport is hiding some mysterious drone that is out to spy on their every move. I can tell you with some confidence that Steve does not appear to be one of these people. In fact, I would argue that Steve would *be one of the best witnesses* to observe something like what he claims to have seen over Texas on March 10th. He has the clear ability to identify aircraft visually, as well as the capability and drive to search through all publicly available data to corroborate what he claims to have seen.

There is also the possibility that Steve and Dean actually believe what they saw was really an unidentified aircraft, but are mistaken for some reason. As I stated in an earlier piece, I highly doubt this. If they were not B-2s then there is nothing else known to be flying that looks like this aside from the diminutive, unmanned and shy RQ-170 Sentinel. Additionally, three triangular flying wings weaving high across the Texas sky is not "swamp gas" or some shared "hallucination."



All this being said, I have to make it clear that I do not know Steve Douglass personally. We do not share pints at the local bar together and I did not attend his wedding. So, can't sit here and vouch for him 100%, but I will say that the chances that these photos are faked are reasonably very low in my opinion. Although Steve has presented similar pictures of flying triangles in the past, even video of one, I have also examined these new shots carefully (remember I am an aviation photographer), and I see no anomalies that would give away some sort of a fabrication of sorts.

If he sold me on these pictures wrongfully, then he also sold *Aviation Week* and many others as well. So I can say with high, but not absolute certainty, that what you see in these pictures did fly within telephoto lens reach of Steve and his friend Dean on that day. As to how Steve has also been able to film or photograph bizarre aircraft flying around America's southwest on occasion, the best answer I can give is that he is the guy that is looking the hardest for them.



The new picture out of Kansas is another story. It sure looks very real, and I have examined it closely in Photoshop, as have many others, and I do not see any clear signs that it is not genuine. The design of the aircraft looks very similar to the majority of Steve's shots. Additionally, the detail shown in the Wichita shot, including the light play on the aircraft's skin, although not fine in quality, does look very realistic. Still, we only have one photo to examine, not a series of shots, so although the timing and detail in the picture seems believable, I cannot say for sure that it is not a fake. Still, given what the man said in his report, and the picture shown above, I would say that it has a good probability of being real.

Theory #2: They are Airliners, B-2 Spirits or some other known aircraft

AF 82 1070
FOXTROT ALPHA

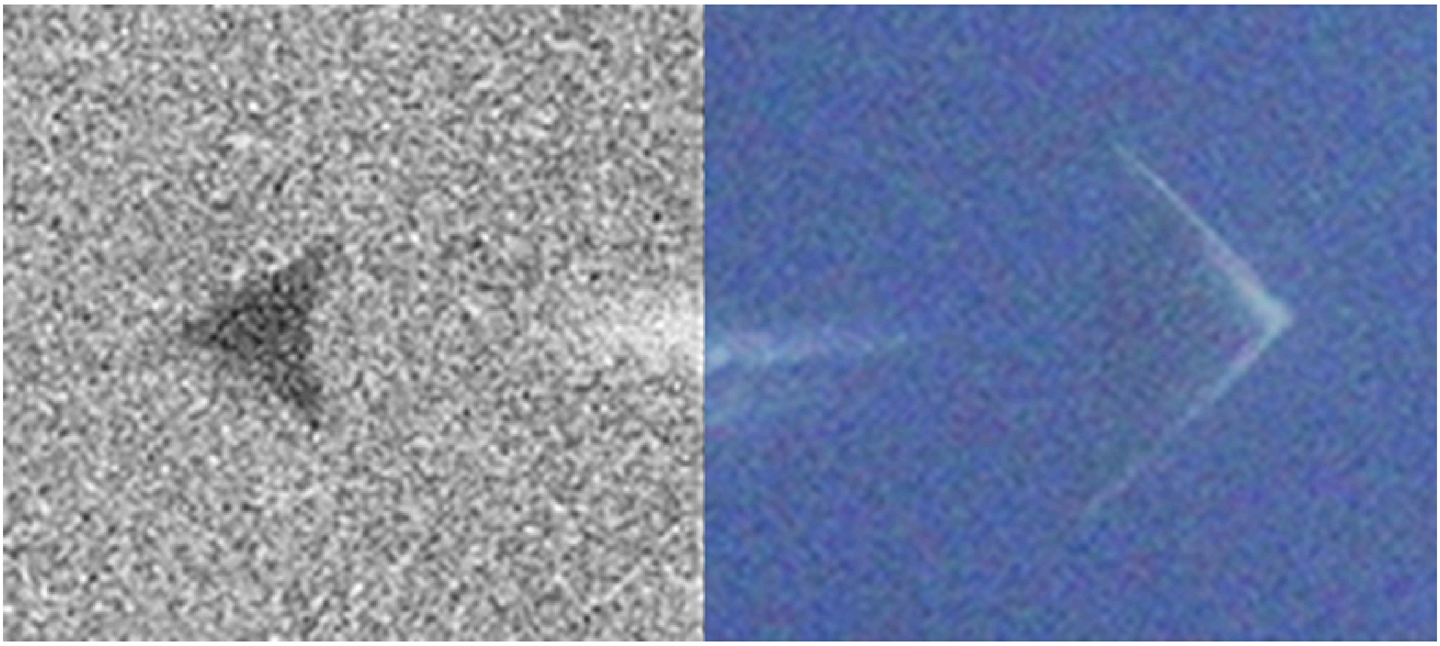
This is a theory that I can tell you is bogus with total certainty. People say that these aircraft are just commercial airliners whose shape are distorted due to an optical illusion or atmospheric interference. Yeah, not so much.

I have spent many years behind many types of camera bodies and lenses, shooting almost exclusively aircraft, and I have never taken a picture of an aircraft at altitude and thought "hey is that a secret flying wing aircraft," nor have any other aviation photographers I know. Sure, once in a while those "hey what is up there" shots can be puzzling as to what type of airliner it is, but not where it clearly shows a flying wing, yet alone three of them in trailing formation! I have also photographed the B-2 at altitude on multiple occasions, and none were even interesting enough to post or keep.

The only large flying wing aircraft that is currently disclosed to the public is the B-2A Spirit, and as I mentioned before, only 20 copies exist and decent portion of these aircraft are in maintenance, deep inspection/overhaul/upgrade, or testing at any given time. In other words, three B-2s tooling around Texas together in formation would be a *not B-2s* as all aircraft were accounted for on the date that his shots were taken.

I see very little utility in denying an unclassified aircraft's presence over American airspace. In fact, saying they were B-2s and just following up with "operations, locations and training schedules are not for public release" would have been an easy out for the USAF. Apparently, they may have attempted to softly rectify the situation weeks later by having three B-2 fly the exact same formation, on almost the exact same route, under the exact same conditions, pulling huge contrails, just as the mystery craft did weeks earlier. Keep in mind, if the B-2s did not want to be seen via their long contrails, they could have optimized their altitude to curtail contrails as the aircraft has a known LIDAR contrail warning system mounted facing aft above its beaver tail and was even built with the capability to inject chemicals into its exhaust to control its contrail signiture, although from all accounts these were never used.

When you add it all up I think it is safe to say the pictures taken last month by Steve and Dean are not B-2s and they were not 767s that magically turned into flying guitar picks because of haze, lens aberration or some other anomaly. This is fortified by the Air Force's odd choice to fly the same flight path with similar but unclassified aircraft weeks after denying that their aircraft were present on the day in question.

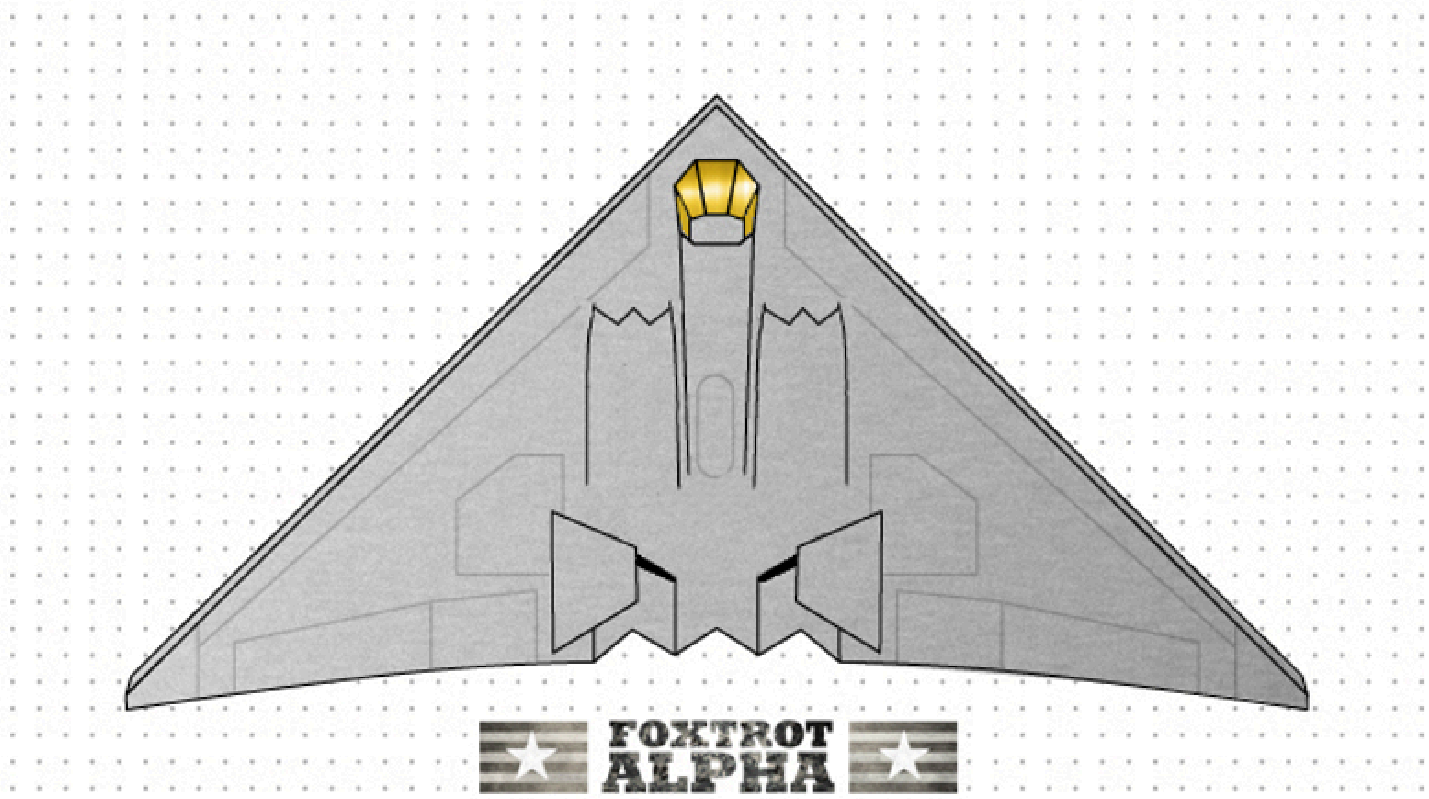


Is One Aircraft Different Than The Rest In The Texas Photos?

Some will say that one of the photos in Steve and Dean's collection looks as if one of the aircraft has a greater sweep and more convex trailing edge than in their others, as well as in the Kansas photo. It does appear that way to some degree, but in the other photos, where all three aircraft are present, they look alike. This is most likely due to the fact that the shot lacks any depth and was taken at great distance. All you see in

If you take a post-it-note and fold it into a triangle, and hold it far away from your face and then tilt it slowly on edge you will see how the triangle appears to have greater and greater sweep as you tilt it toward flat. Now take that same idea and magnify it by seven miles and make it a small and dark silhouette. The relatively tiny distance from the wing closest to you and the one pointed away in the bank is just a very small fraction of the total distance from the shooter too the subject and thus the depth is all but indecipherable. It is simple physics and if you spend enough time behind a camera shooting aircraft, especially as silhouettes at sunset you notice it regularly. Although it is technically still possible that all three aircraft could have been different variations of flying wing shapes, it is not likely, and a clean triangular shape is supported by the Kansas photo. Still, anything is possible considering the limited amount of data at hand.

Theory #3: Classified Manned Penetrating Reconnaissance Aircraft

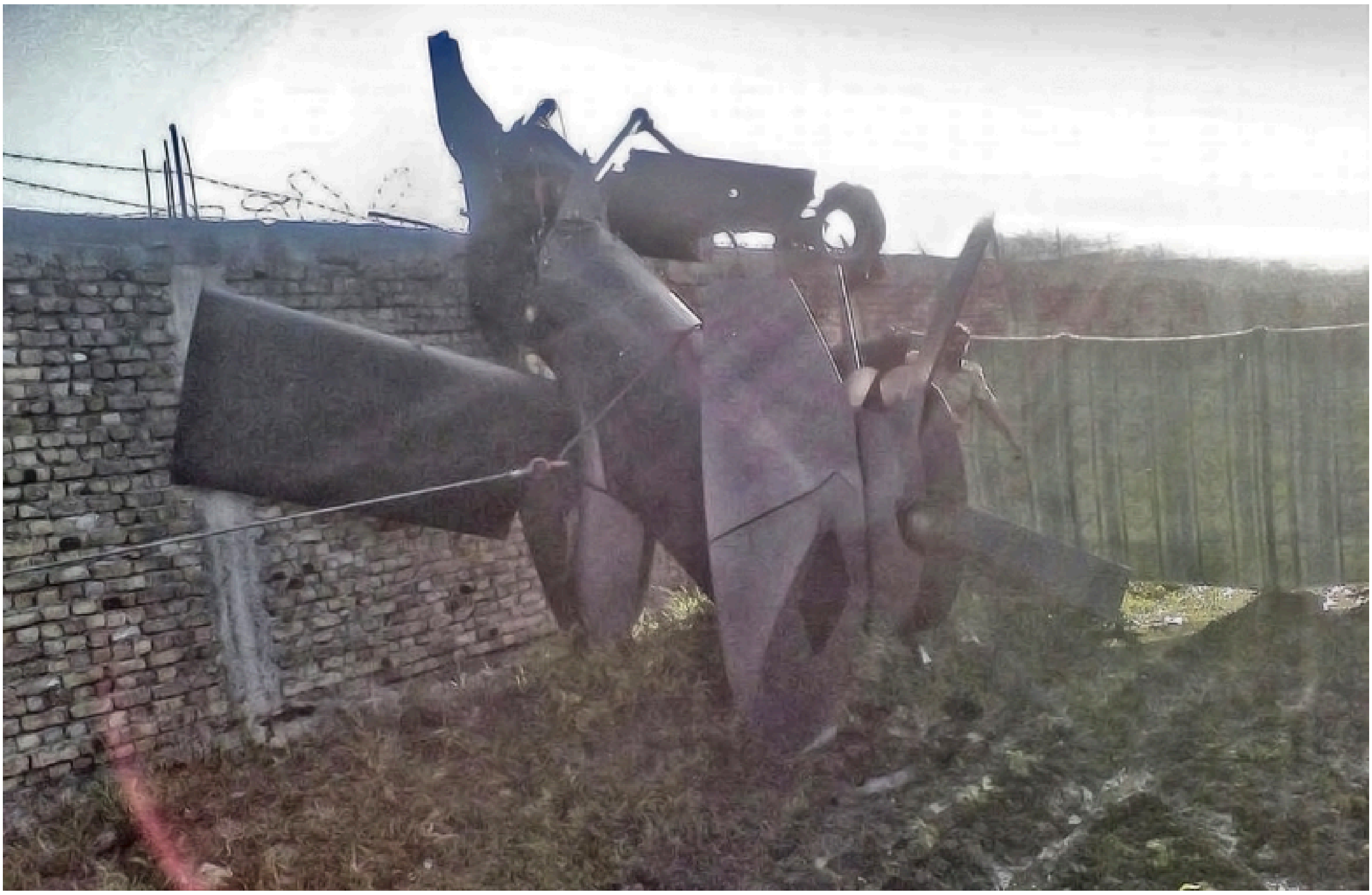


(Author's Note: The following is based on speculation and the fusion of many reports, rumors, recurring themes in relation to black aircraft programs and historical capability gaps within America's intelligence and air combat services. Accounts, timelines, designations and interpretations of the scarce information at hand may vary. Not every

I think it is extremely safe to say that the DoD has had many more secret aerospace projects over the last 30+ years than the few that have been disclosed. In fact, there is rumored to be a good portion of a massive hangar at Area 51 full of these long retired but still shadowy programs. There have been so many in fact that the USAF and industry have been known to just bury these historical but obscure aircraft as there is simply no room to store them at the sprawling Area 51 and Tonopah Air Force Base installations.

Additionally, many sightings over the years in and around the sprawling Nellis Range Complex, the famous North Sea flying triangle spotting and incidents such as the crash RAF Boscombe Down and other similar events, have added to the pile of evidence that America invests in multiple clandestine flying programs at any given time.

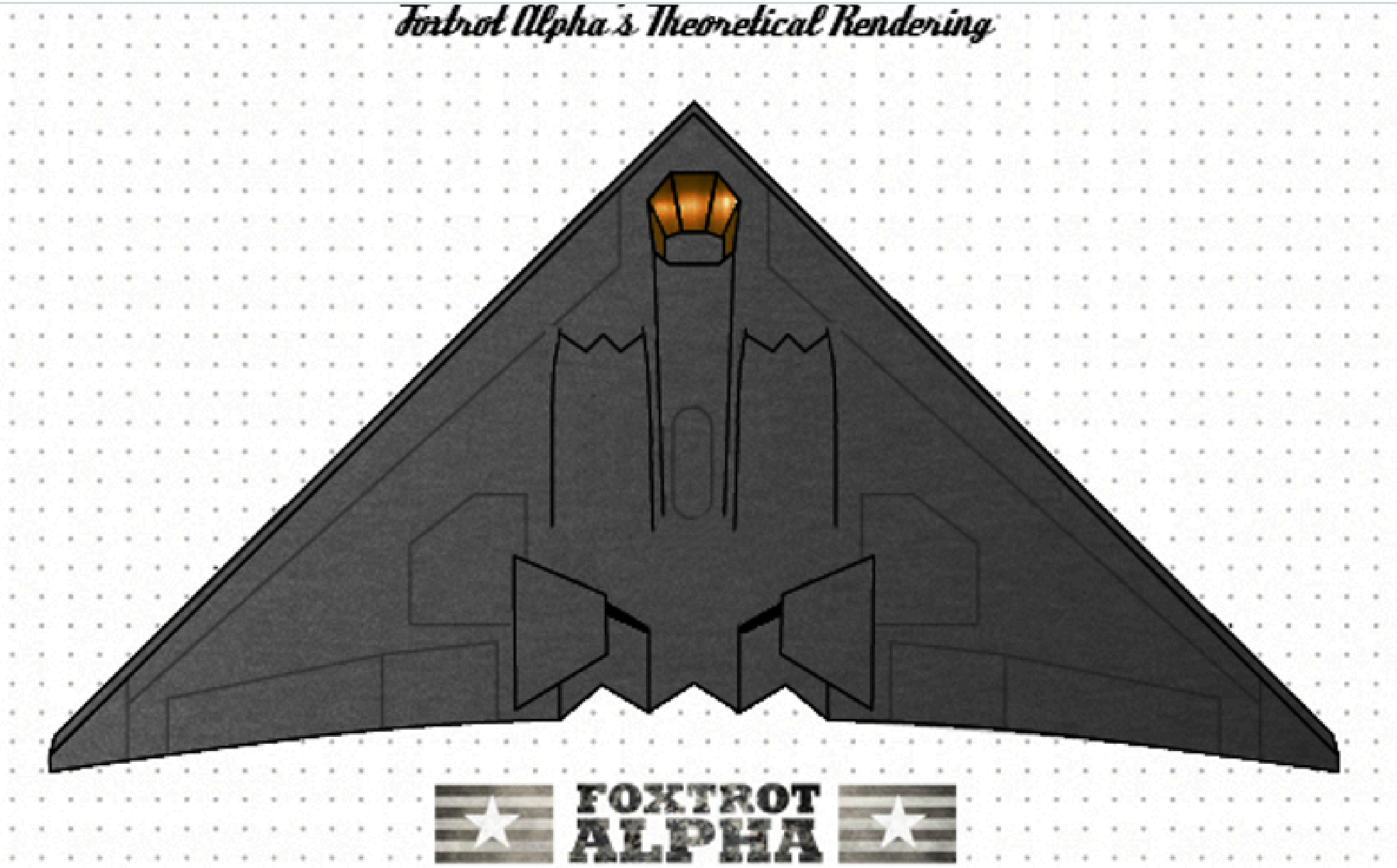
Then there are the billions upon billions of dollars that are spent annually on these "black budget" programs, and certainly some have resulted in flying prototypes, if not production aircraft. We were reminded of this in 2011 when a previously unheard of stealth helicopter's tail was left totally intact outside Bin Laden's backyard wall.



The "unidentified flying triangle" happens to also be a craze among the UFO crowd, and of all the sightings reported of various UFOs, the ones related to triangular craft often years, people in and around the Southwestern US reported UFOs that have now turned out to be declassified secret projects such as the F-117 and SR-71 programs. What is to say that some of these spotting were not in fact secret flying wing aircraft belonging to the boys in blue, not little green men?

The reality is that the flying triangle, otherwise known as a "spanloader," is a well known modern aircraft design planform that is known for its potential low observable nature and aerodynamic efficiency. One place where this unique design has been rumored to have been employed above all others is for a manned tactical penetrating reconnaissance aircraft. Such an aircraft is also at the very top of the "capability gap" list when it comes to suspected aircraft that could have, or even should have, been secretly developed and tested. One particular rumored designation stands out among all others when it comes to such a mission and a design is the TR-3A "Black Manta."

For the purposes of this article, we will use the rumored TR-3A "Black Manta" designation to describe a manned, deep penetrating, stealth reconnaissance aircraft even though the designation and name may be totally false, ***and yes I am aware that "TR-3A" could have been a discombobulation of the "Tier 3" unmanned requirement of the mid 1990s****, but that is an entirely different story altogether that has no impact on the conceptual nature of this piece.*



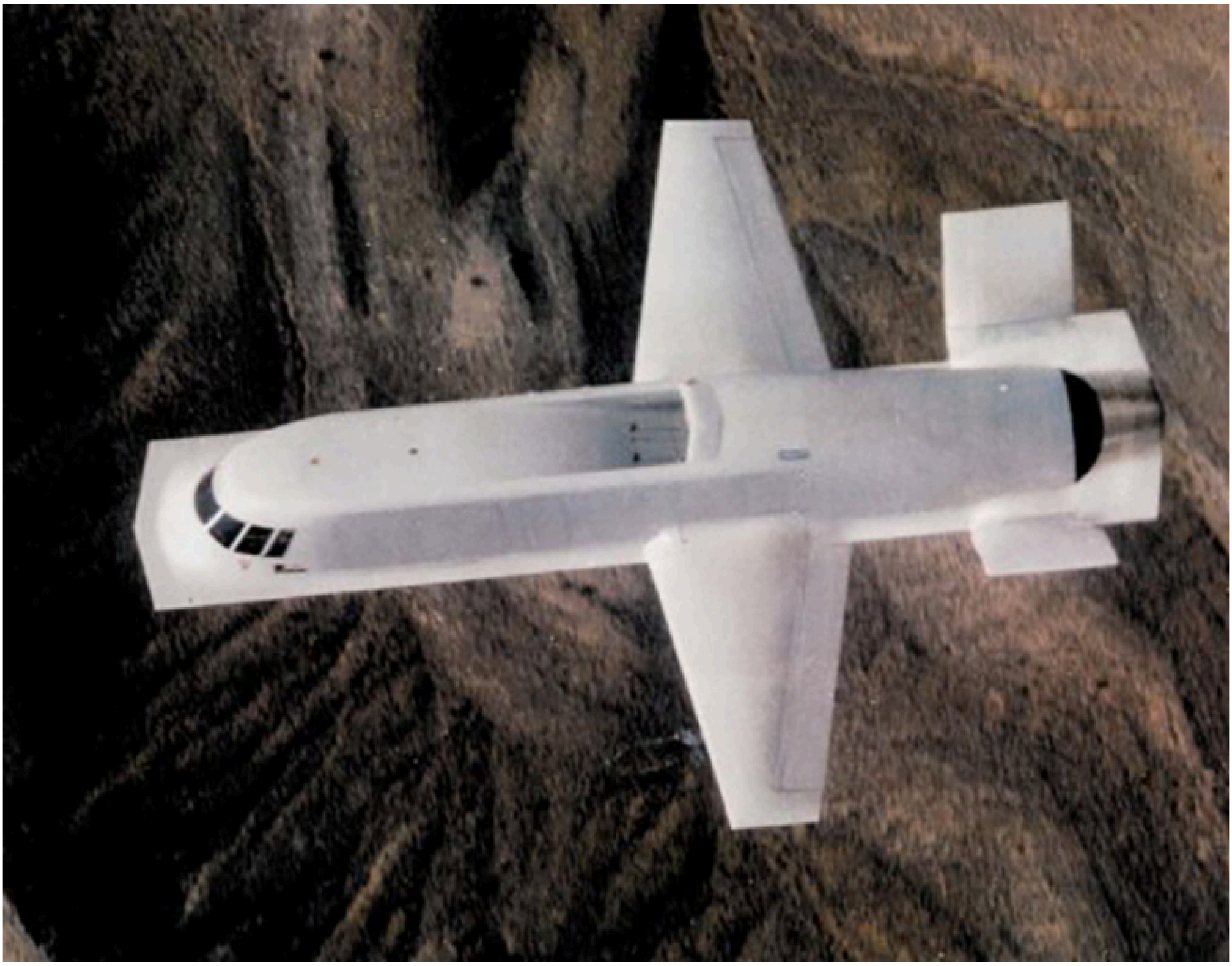
The Mythical TR-3A Black Manta

The TR-3A, also sometimes referred to as ASTRA (Advanced Stealth Tactical Reconnaissance Aircraft), is one of the most widely theorized black aircraft projects of all time, right up there with, but in many ways much more logical than the fabled hypersonic Aurora. A TR-3A, or whatever you want to call it, is thought by some to have become at least experimentally operational at some point in time between the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The Black Manta was said to be of tactical size, with a wingspan under 100 feet. The shape has been reported to be akin to a triangular flying wing, and some reports mention that it may have had slightly rounded apexes, although others say that the aircraft was a sharp flying delta wing design. The engines inlets were reported to have been mounted atop the wing with small inward canted tails being placed towards the rear of the engine nacelle "humps." A large flat sunken exhaust and flat dissipation area, similar to that found on the B-2, is a logical design element dating back to the late 1970's stealth designs and the canted tails would further mask the aircraft's infrared signature from side viewing angles. The TR-3A had one or possibly two crew.

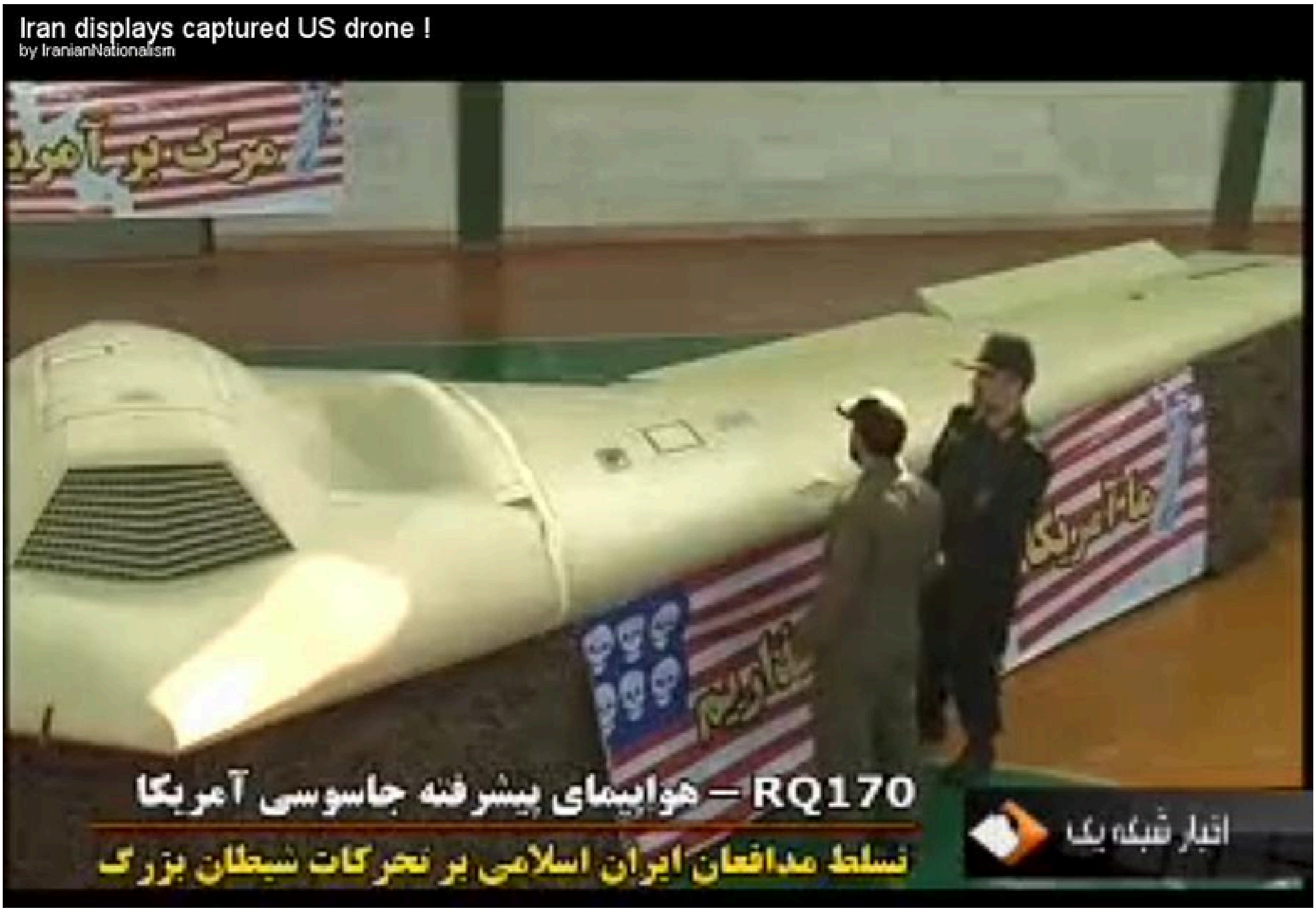
This aircraft has had a few distinct missions rumored to have been assigned to it. The first was as a laser designator aircraft for the F-117. This makes little sense as the F-117 would seem extremely redundant, but having it as a secondary mission is plausible, especially considering the limitations of laser guidance during inclement weather. The other missions, and the ones that seem much more plausible, were as a penetrating and persistent manned reconnaissance platform and possibly as a tactical jamming and electronic warfare aircraft.

You can only truly appreciate how plausible the existence of a TR-3A Black Manta like aircraft is by understanding the aircraft that came before it and after it, both of which are now disclosed. These are Northrop's Tacit Blue technology demonstrator and Lockheed's RQ-170 Sentinel unmanned penetrating reconnaissance aircraft. Please read RQ-170 Origins Part One and RQ-170 Origins Part Two in order to fully understand this shadowy pedigree.



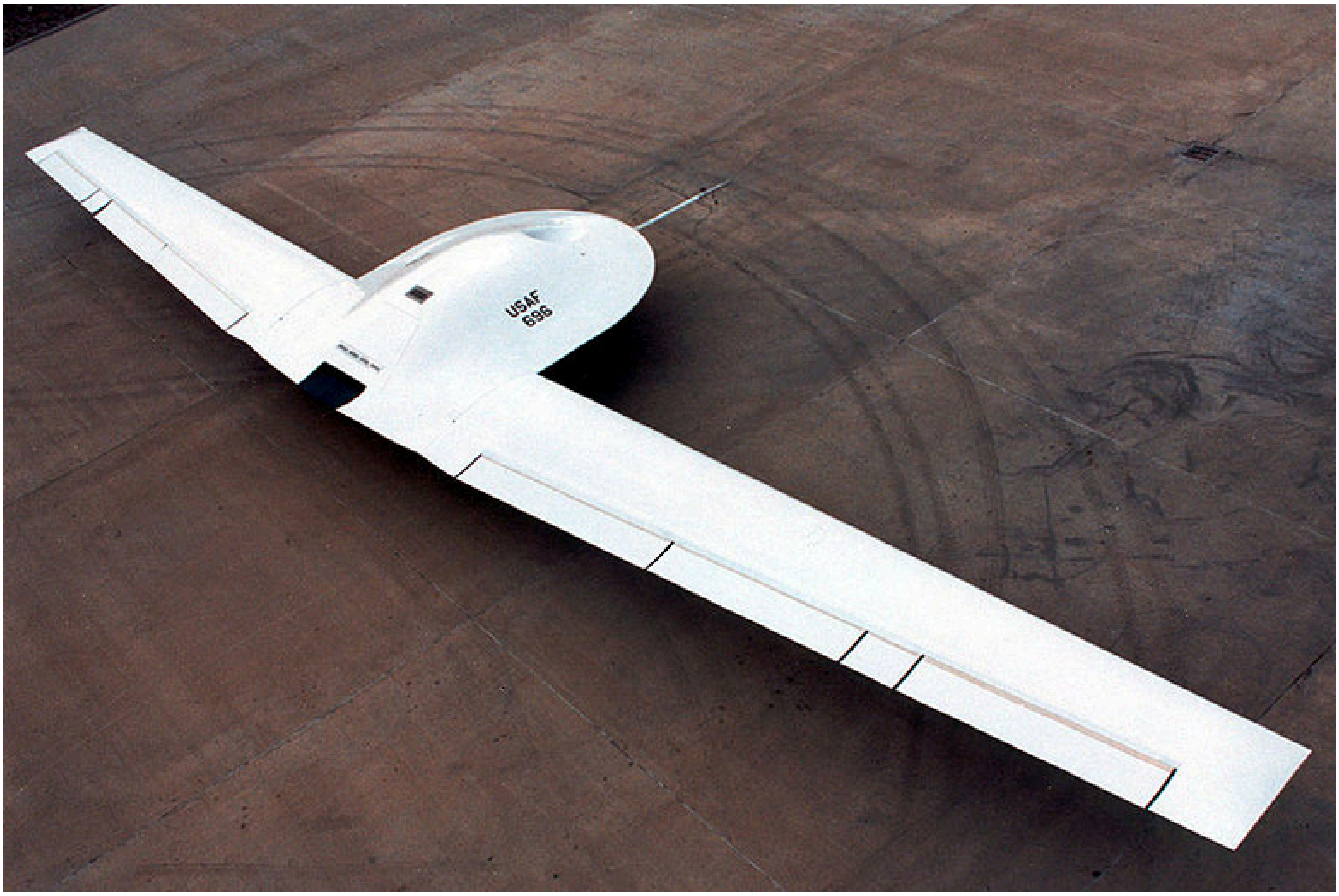
As a surveillance aircraft, the TR-3A was rumored to be developed in the mid 1980s as a result of the Battlefield Surveillance Aircraft eXperimental (BSAX) program, which came to fruition in the form of Northrop's Tacit Blue technology demonstrator. Tacit Blue proved that a stealthy aircraft could penetrate deep into enemy territory and loiter

(GMTI) radar as well as low probability of intercept data transfer capabilities among other groundbreaking stealth technologies. The ability to not only loiter and survey the enemy passively, but actively as well using radar, while also transmitting that data far away for off-board analysis, all without the enemy detecting the aircraft's emissions, showed the USAF that it was possible to be a metaphorical fly on the enemy's wall, albeit at 30,000 feet.


Iran displays captured US drone !
by IranianNationalism
هواپیمای پیشرفته جاسوسی آمریکا – RQ170
تسلط مدافعان ایران اسلامی بر تحرکات شیطان بزرگ
اخبار شبکه یک

Tacit Blue is widely regarded as one of the most successful clandestine research and development projects of the Cold War. Although we have seen its design attributes used widely in stealth aircraft and cruise missiles ever sense, the aircraft's conceptual impact was so great that we are only really seeing it today, some 30 years after its last flight, in the form of the RQ-170 Sentinel. The Sentinel, an aircraft that has gone down in history as being an integral part of finally finding and fixing Bin Laden, while also keeping tabs on the Iran's nuclear program (and most likely North Korea's as well). The very concept of BSAX and Tacit Blue lives on in the heart of the RQ-170's core mission as a stealthy, persistent observer that can peak over the enemy's shoulder unnoticed for hours on end.

reconnaissance even though airborne high speed "snapshot" surveillance was clearly falling out of favor with the DoD as satellites could do the vast majority of this work. They say a picture can tell a thousands words, but it is still depicts only a moment in time. Hours of surveillance video, radar tracks, communications and electronic intelligence, in a high fidelity form, taken right over the enemy's own territory, literally tells the whole story.



This is precisely where an aircraft like the TR-3A bridges the gap between Tacit Blue and the defunct RQ-3 Darkstar that emerged in the late 1990s before being "cancelled" towards the very end of that decade. The reality is that Darkstar, or at least its unmanned mission, almost surely went into the black world, resulting in the RQ-170 years later, whose development was almost certainly accelerated due to the attacks of of September 11th and the burgeoning need to monitor the nuclear programs in Pakistan, North Korea and Iran.

In other words, some twenty plus years would pass between the last flight of Tacit Blue and the emergence of the RQ-170 Sentinel. Seeing as persistent, penetrating reconnaissance was clearly the wave of the future, which was highlighted by the retirement of the SR-71 Blackbird and the introduction to the the unmanned "Tier" requirements of the mid 1990s, are we to believe that the USAF opted not to build a

As far back as the late 1970s, unmanned systems were thought to have been ideal for the penetrating persistent reconnaissance mission, but the technological know-how and communications infrastructure just was not mature enough to make such a system pilotless. The possibility that the aircraft photographed over Texas and Kansas are manned would most likely be a result of the lack of high-bandwidth satellite data transfer capabilities, command and control architecture and computer processing at the time of their development. If these aircraft were built within the last decade and a half, the fact that they are manned may signify a rush from initial design to operational capability due to an immediate set of needs, such as an interim stop-gap measure before an unmanned system, like the RQ-170, came online. In other words, if an aircraft like the TR-3A could have been unmanned it would have been.

F-117 Nighthawk Involvement?

The F-117's own limitations may have also given the TR-3A, or another aircraft similar to it, the mission of a penetrating tactical radar jamming aircraft. The idea is that this stealthy flying wing aircraft, that should be effectively low observable over a wider number of bands than the F-117 which was optimized to reduce radar returns primarily from X band radars and especially from certain angles, could monitor the F-117s target before it arrives, sending updates to the inbound F-117 via LPI data link. At the same time, it could also selectively jam enemy radar emitters that threaten the F-117's highly orchestrated approach and departure route to and from the target area. Such an aircraft could also take a snapshot infrared picture or synthetic aperture radar image of the target after the F-117s attack to be used for near real time bomb damage assessment. In such a role, the TR-3A would have been America's true "first in, last out" combat aircraft.

The TR-3A, when viewed as a possible F-117 enabler, makes a lot of sense, as with proper mission planning a single TR-3A may be able to "cover" multiple F-117 bombing runs on a single sortie. Still, such an aircraft, if it does exist, was most likely not a staple for all F-117 missions, just for those that were deemed high risk, or high priority enough to warrant their use. Such a system was rumored to have been operating with F-117s as far back as the Desert Storm in 1991.

Additionally, the TR-3A, or whatever you want to call it, may have helped prolong the F-117s usability as its ability to jam radars that emit as the F-117 passes by on its delicate route would have greatly increased the Nighthawk's survivability. This is especially true if the F-117 was "painted" by a hostile radar from angles that offered a higher radar cross section return than others, or was operating at longer wavelengths that would allow the Nighthawk to be more detectable at close range.

Standoff jamming was often used for F-117 operations against capable enemies, but an aircraft that could jam radars selectively, over the short periods of time while the F-117 was vulnerable, with great precision and lower power than their traditional standoff cousins (EF-111 and EA-6B) may have proven the difference for F-117 crews between coming back alive or not. Such an aircraft may have remained of great use after the F-117 retired and could have been adapted as a delivery vehicle for "Suter" air defense network hacking capability and for jamming assistance for other clandestine assets, and thus may only now just be emerging out of the "black world" as unmanned technologies take its place.

CIA Involvement?

An aircraft like the TR-3A could have been very attractive to the CIA as well as the USAF. Being able to loiter over denied airspace undetected, while collecting video and recording communications is a game changing capability that the Black Manta could have provided The Agency in the same manner that the RQ-170 Sentinel does today. Considering that the CIA would have only received such a capability in the last decade (when only accounting for the aircraft that we know about, i.e. the RQ-170), it is entirely possible that the Black Manta was mainly a boutique CIA project, at least in its early career. This was true for the A-12 "Oxcart program" before it morphed into a USAF operation in the form of a reconfigured aircraft known as the famous SR-71 Blackbird. The same can be said for the U-2 that came before it. In fact, some might argue that a TR-3A like persistent surveillance stealth aircraft would have just as much historical data pointing toward it originating from the CIA as it would from the USAF.

The Agency has had an Air Force for the better part of the century, made up of everything from down and dirty transports to the most advanced aircraft man has ever built. Are we really to believe that they left the higher end of the spectrum after the A-12 Oxcart program of the 1960's and never looked back until the unmanned RQ-170 Sentinel arrived in their drone stable? An aircraft with almost the identical mission set as a theoretical Black Manta, aside from the fact that it is unmanned.

AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

What About The Special Operations Command?

Special Operations Command (SOCOM) could also have great use for an aircraft that could provide streaming video and general over-watch of special forces missions underway, or soon to be underway, deep inside enemy territory. Such an aircraft could have also worked as a beyond line of sight communications relay platform that would allow forces operating below it to communicate with command personnel over the horizon and even around the globe.

The very idea that stealth technology had existed for decades, but only now we are seeing a special forces overwatch in denied airspace capabilty come to light via the RQ-170, is highly suspect. This is especially strange considering the escalating SOCOM budget throughout the last few decades. It would even be logical to go as far as saying in the 1992 Tom Clancy thriller ***Patriot Games***, is clearly a game changer.

Patriot Games (6/9) Movie CLIP - Primary Target (1992) HD

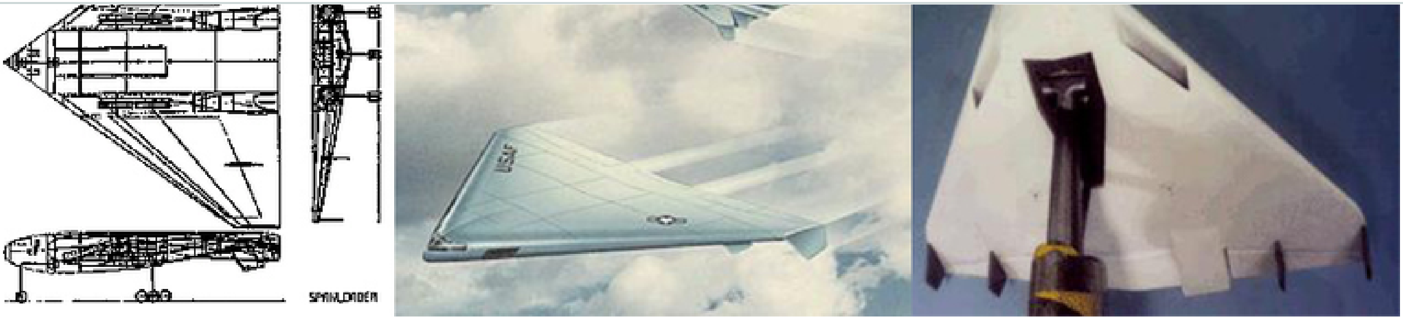
Share

Watch on YouTube

Seeing as the penetrating stealth surveillance aircraft concept clearly existed as far back as the early 1980's, wouldn't it be almost self defeating for SOCOM not to attempt to leverage it? Additionally, we have seen what the special operations community can do when it comes to exotic stealthy aircraft via the delivery vehicles used in the Bin Laden raid. Maybe the stealthy Blackhawks used in it were not the first secret stealth asset tailored for SOCOM use at all. Maybe a TR-3A type of surveillance aircraft, that could provide real time streaming video during special operations, was actually the first stealth aircraft operated under SOCOM.

Northrop's THAP and General Dynamics' Sneaky Pete

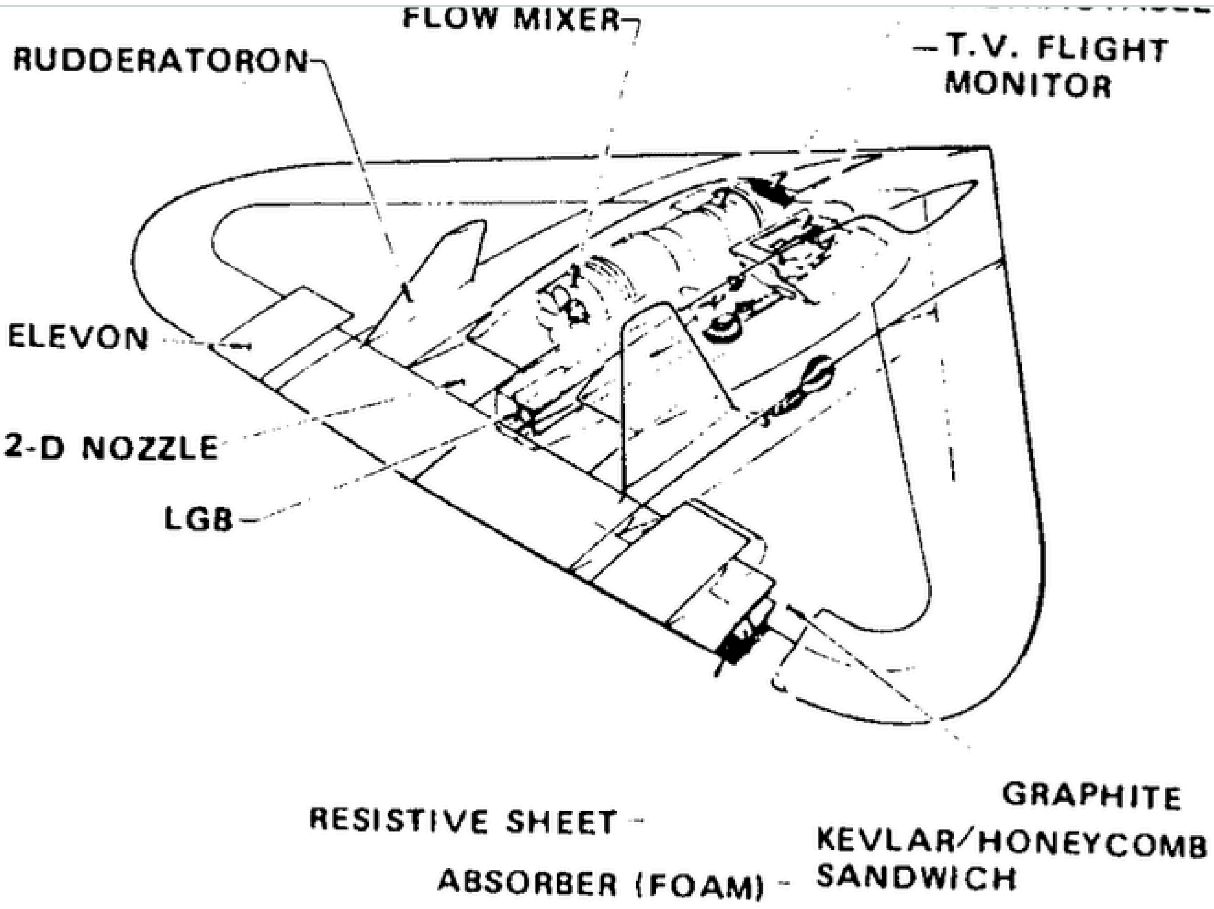
As far as who could have built a manned stealthy flying wing penetrating reconnaissance aircraft, Northrop comes to mind first and General Dynamics (now Lockheed Martin) and McDonnell Douglas comes to mind second and third. Still, it is key to note that any military aircraft manufacturer, including a boutique design house like Scaled Composites, could have pulled an aircraft like this off to varying degrees of success with proper funding. In fact Rockwell was also highly interested with "spanload" airframes in the 1970's (some designs shown below).



Northrop?

Northrop built Tacit Blue, as well as the promising XST competitor to what would become the F-117, not to mention the B-2 and then the YF-23. Also, when it comes to flying wings, Jack Northrop was a man on a mission, albeit today the design is widespread and synonymous with low observable unmanned aircraft. Scaling down the Advanced Technology Bomber design (which would become the B-2) would be a good place to start for building such an aircraft, but this design could have also evolved directly from a scaled down ATB technology demonstrator that was rumored to have flown before the B-2's design was locked and just after Tacit Blue had concluded its hugely successful flight test program in the mid 1980's.

A sub-scale technology demonstrator for a strategic bomber may have had just the perfect dimensions and performance capabilities for an unarmed tactical reconnaissance perpetrator. Some of the B-2's subsystems and technologies, such as its radar system, which also benefited greatly from Tacit Blue, and its communication systems and construction techniques could have been at least partially ported over to a Black Manta-like program.

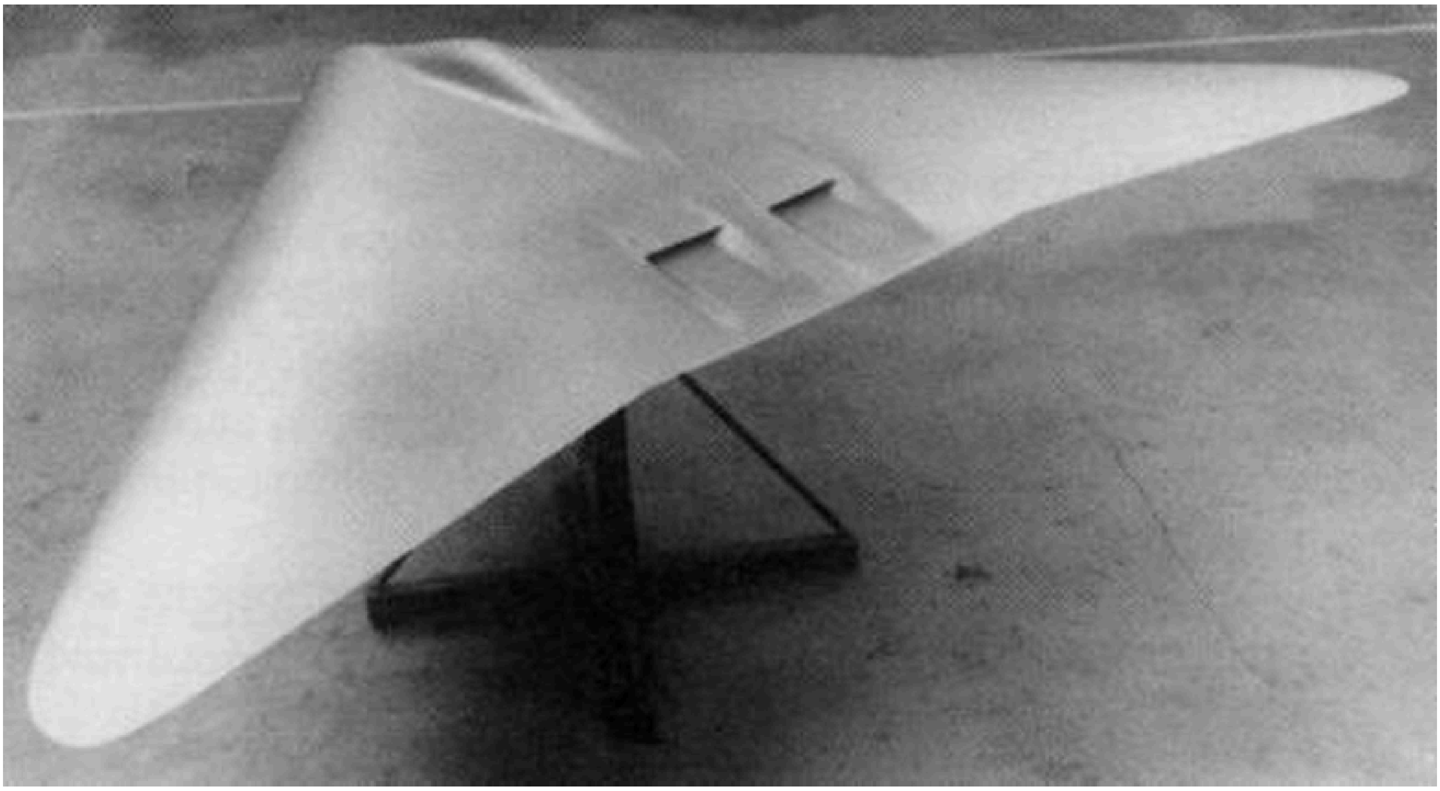


Shown in the photograph above is the Tactical High Altitude Penetrator (THAP) aircraft whose design is optimized to avoid detection by hostile defenses.

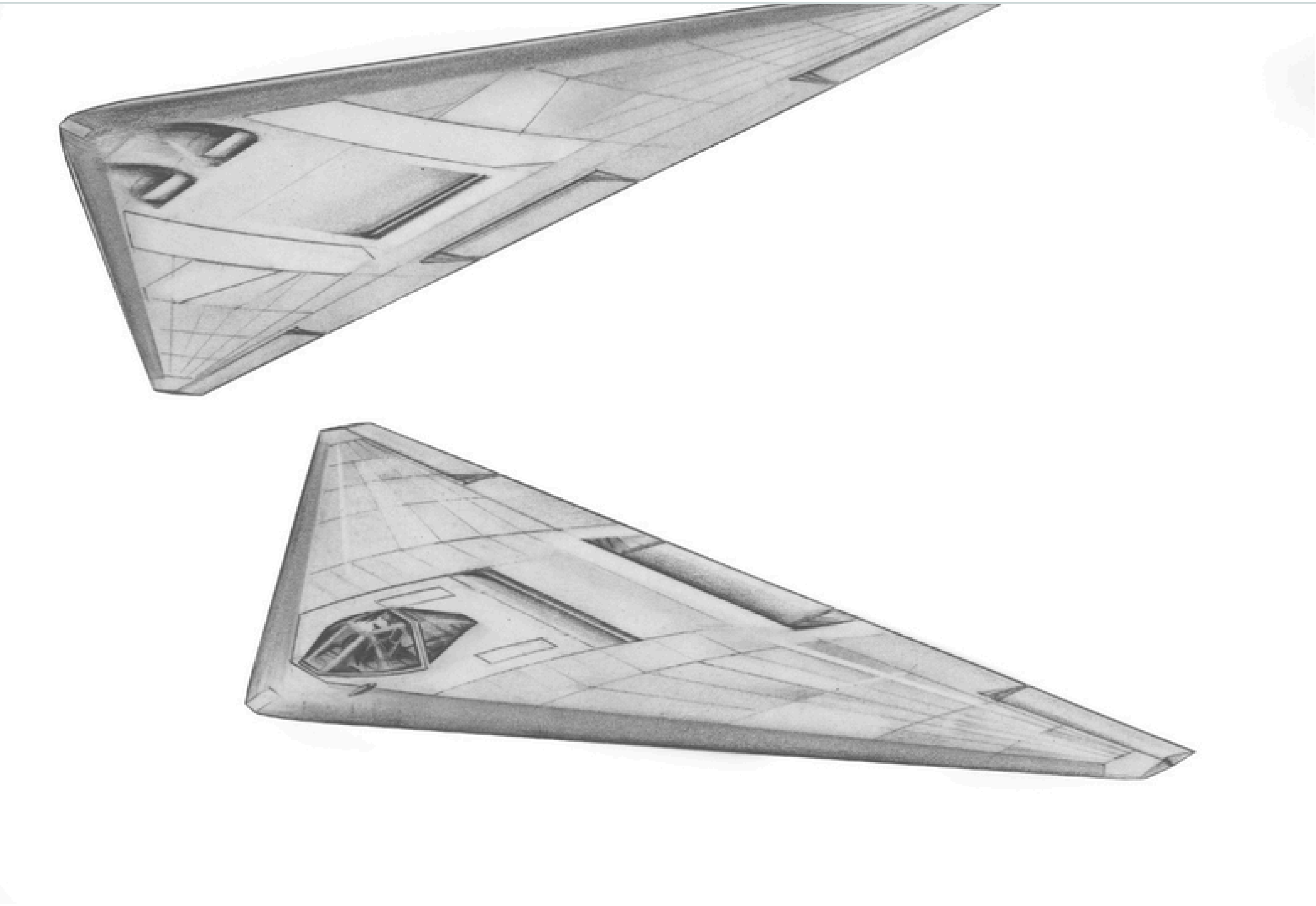
One Northrop concept known as Tactical High Altitude Penetrator (THAP) was quite possibly built and tested. This aircraft was rumored to operate just as described above, loitering at high altitudes surveying an enemy that had no idea it was being surveyed. There is also some rumor of a direct connection to the F-117 program which adds clout to the TR-3A "first in, last out" concept when operating in coordination with the Nighthawk fleet.

Other various rumored aircraft under the Northrop guise exist, many with similar capabilities but different names, yet the THAP concept maybe traced farther back to a pair of Teledyne Ryan patents from the 1970's, one of a manned aircraft design and one unmanned aircraft design that share a very close resemblance to the aircraft photographed recently. Is it possible that Teledyne Ryan's concept was adapted into the THAP and that ended up as an operational TR-3A Black Manta type of aircraft? It would seem plausible when also considering the close ties between Northrop and Teledyne Ryan (Northrop actually acquired the company in the late 1990s) as well as Northrop's history of producing the Tacit Blue technology demonstrator, the B-2 and bid to, the Lockheed F-22 Raptor.

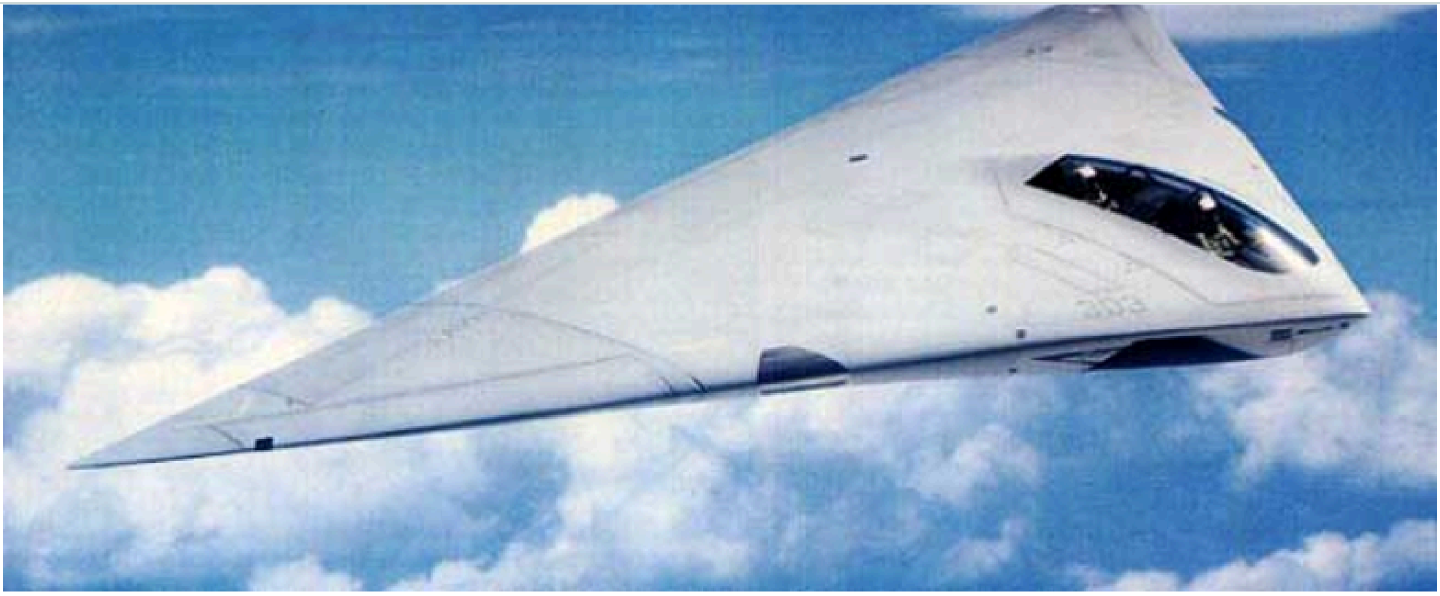
General Dynamics?



General Dynamics (now Lockheed Martin) is also a candidate for being responsible for the mystery flying wing craft. General Dynamics, like Northrop and Lockheed, were beginning to rub the stealth genie lamp back in the mid 1970s. The legendary aviation firm's interest in low observable aircraft led them to the Model 100 concept, otherwise known as "Cold Pigeon."

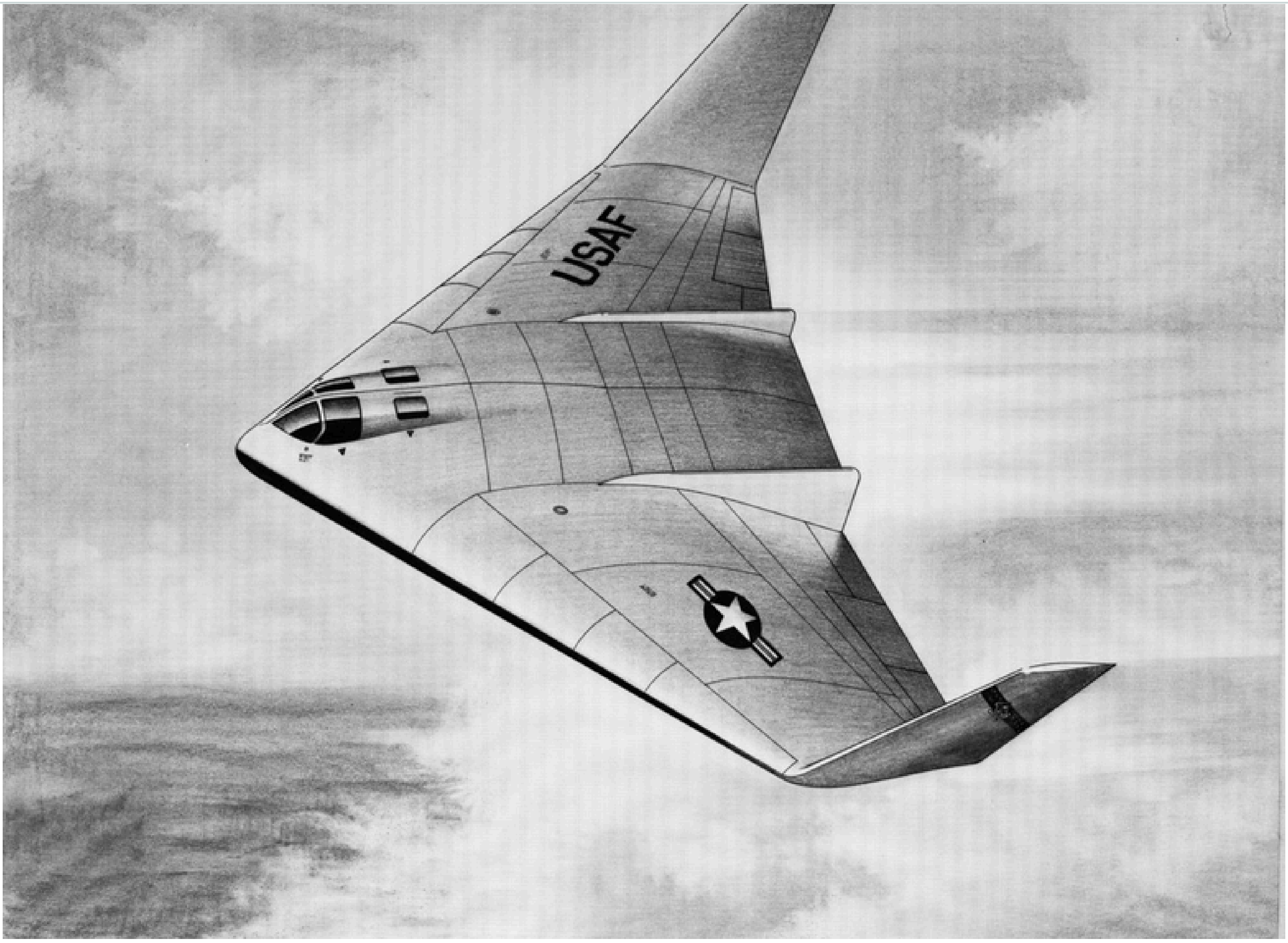


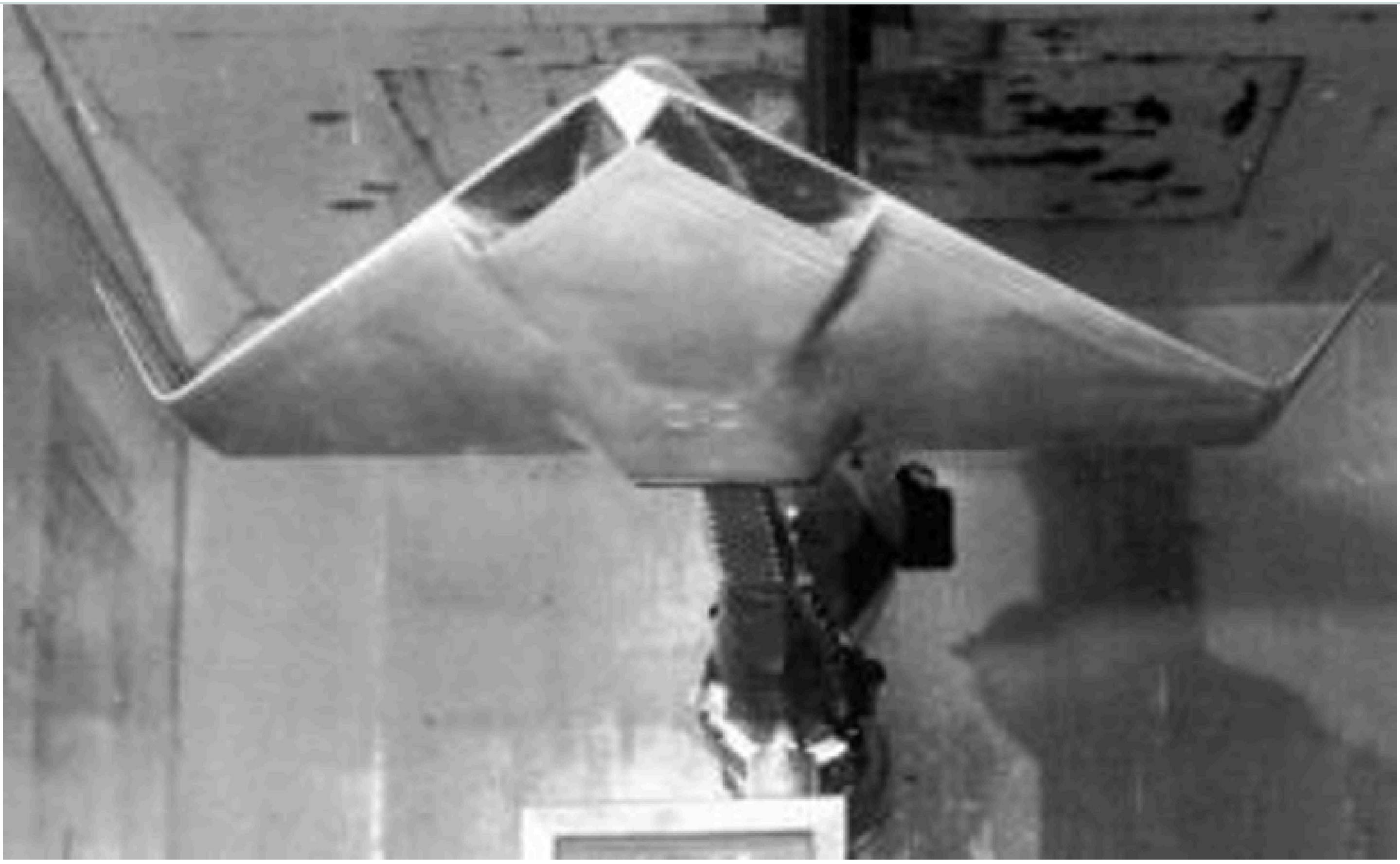
The design was a flying wing triangular platform that appears almost identical to what is seen in the recent photographs. After building a large scale model for radar cross section testing, the USAF got involved in the program under the name "Have Key." This secretive program was rumored to run though the mid 1980s under a USAF requirement for a tactical penetrating reconnaissance and attack aircraft. Some rumors state that a Model 100 demonstrator flew around 1983. By the mid-1980's the design was refined and turned into a concept called "Sneaky Pete." This final iteration would be the winner of the Advanced Tactical Aircraft project, which would in turn morph into the US Navy's A-12 Avenger (no relation to the A-12 Oxcart/Blackbird) program, an aircraft that looked almost exactly like the aircraft pictured in the Kansas sighting.



The winning of the ATA contract would see General Dynamics paired with McDonnell Douglas for the aircraft's final design, testing and production. The pairing of the two firms made some sense as they both had worked on "flying triangle" designs for some time as a method for lowering an aircraft's radar cross-section and gaining aerodynamic efficiency.

Douglas Aircraft even presented a flying delta wing design with upward swept winglets for the Advanced Technology Bomber contract of the late 1970's, but they lost to Lockheed and Northrop, and rightfully so as their understanding of low observable design was far behind Lockheed and Northrop at the time. McDonnell Douglas was also a contender for the ATA, with a more stealth optimized upturned flying wing design that was actually quite similar to General Dynamics "Sneaky Pete" design. This was originally viewed as a positive as they began working as a team in an attempt to execute the doomed A-12 Avenger program.


USAF



In the end, the A-12 Avenger never made it to a prototype form before being cancelled by then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney in 1991, or so they say. Interestingly enough, a lawsuit between the federal government and General Dynamics (as well as subcontractor McDonnell Douglas, now Boeing) over the cancellation costs of the Avenger program was finally settled after two decades earlier this year. It is odd that aircraft looking almost identical to the A-12, which officially never flew, have popped up in broad daylight within months of this decades long suit ending.

I am not saying that these aircraft were necessarily the prototypes for the A-12 aircraft, as official none are said to exist, although over a half dozen were funded, but the timing is very odd. Could the aircraft in question be a lighter, simpler surveillance forerunner to the A-12 Avenger, or even a technology demonstrator such as the "Sneaky Pete" aircraft that many said flew during the mid to late 1980's?

The A-12 Avenger was supposed to be carrier capable, with folding wings, slow speed approach capability, heavy payload and large fuel volume, all of which came with at the price of a very robust yet complex composite structure. When you take away these aggressive design goals you have an aircraft that is fairly feasible to build, even if just for testing and developmental purposes.

fashion now that the court proceedings surrounding the defunct program have finally been ended? Having even a few low observable aircraft that could be used for different testing duties may have been beneficial for the Navy as the promise of fielding any low observable aircraft in any numbers has been unfulfilled since the cancellation of the A-12 some twenty plus years ago. Even using these aircraft as stealthy aggressors for which to test new radars and other systems may have been worth the money spent to keep them flying or to get them flying in the first place.

Naval Special Warfare Command may have also seen something very useful in a even a small lot of low observable aircraft for the same reasons why SOCOM in general could benefit from a TR-3A like aircraft. The Navy spec ops folks are very industrious with utilizing even the most cutting edge "force multiplier" technologies in an attempt to gain even the slightest tactical advantage. Maybe one man's useless, half-built technology demonstrator is another man's low density-high value guardian angel on high for the most demanding of special forces operations.

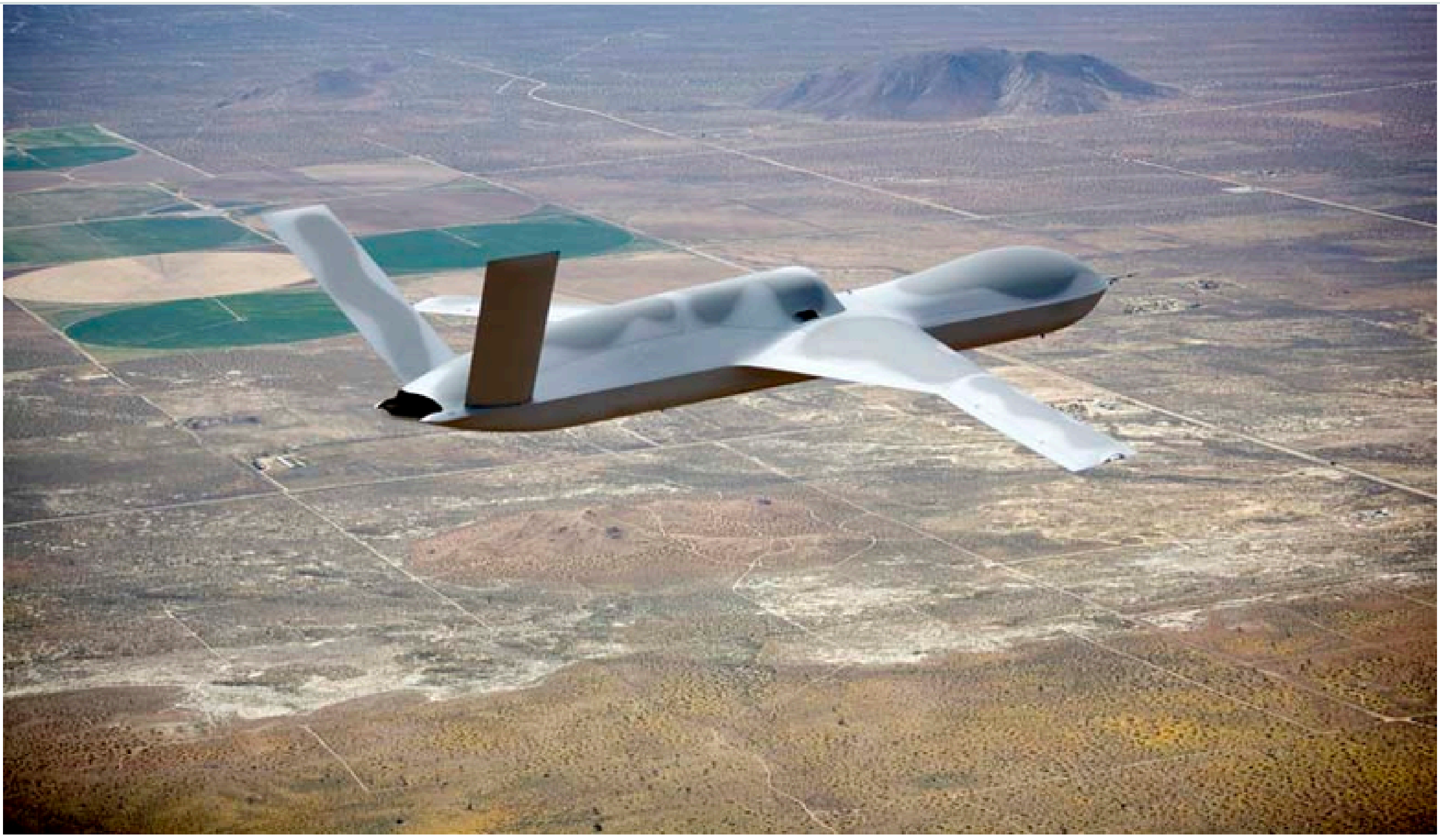
Regardless of what the true story surrounding Cold Pigeon, Sneaky Pete and the A-12, is, the fact is that these aircraft concepts look almost identical to the aircraft spotted of Wichita, and very similar to those seen over Texas. More so than any other identifiable or rumored secret aircraft program in fact.

Theory #4: Classified Penetrating Tactical Manned Attack Aircraft:

Such a capability is less likely than a reconnaissance/jamming aircraft as described earlier, although that is not to say that a penetrating reconnaissance design could not be adapted to have a secondary strike capability. This would be especially useful for engaging targets of opportunity that are time sensitive in nature.

A precursor to unmanned systems of today, a stealthy aircraft of this nature, capable of dropping even just a pair of 500lb bombs, while also being able to loiter for long periods of time within enemy airspace, would be a very useful asset, especially during the War On Terror. Similar to how the MQ-1 Predator was armed after its introduction first as a surveillance aircraft, a lightly armed TR-3A like aircraft could allow for the "kill chain" to be dramatically compressed as both the surveillance capability and striking capability could be provided by the same platform, at the same time.

For use as a CIA light strike and surveillance platform, or even supporting special forces, an aircraft like this would make great sense as having the ability to attack in direct support of special forces operating inside enemy territory, or being able to rapidly engage high value targets of opportunity during penetrating surveillance missions, would be a "game changing" capability. Additionally, such a capability may have been of urgent need in the years immediately following the attacks on 9/11. Under such a requirement it is possible that even a small lot of surplus stealth technology demonstrators were re-roled and shoved into operation as a stop-gap measure until stealthy unmanned systems were able to take their place, a time which has almost certainly come.



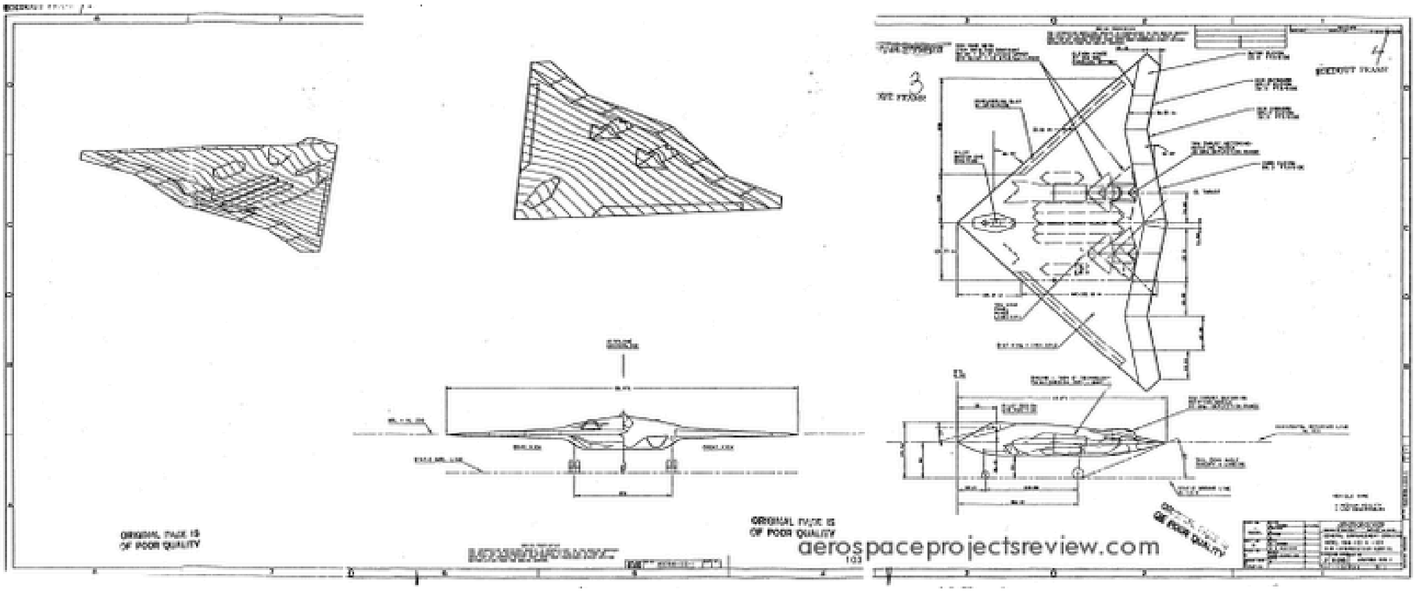
The reason why a medium attack capability aimed at fixed targets does not make a ton of sense for this mystery aircraft is that such a mission would fall to an unmanned system if it were fielded within the last decade. Before that, the F-117 had the ability to drop the largest standard munitions in the USAF inventory, 2,000lb class guided bombs, with great accuracy, regardless of weather conditions. Why would this capability be duplicated by a less numerous manned asset *unless* the F-117's replacement, or even partial replacement, was already in play more than a decade before its retirement and we are just seeing it emerge now.

This scenario could also make such a manned strike capability, one more advanced than the F-117, obsolete as unmanned combat air vehicles are now more capable of delivering a heavy punch against fixed targets over long ranges and offer the added bonus of not having to put an aircrew at risk. If this is the case, then a impending declassification of such a manned weapon system would be logical.

The F-117A was somewhat abruptly retired before the USAF had originally planned, during the Bush years of flowing defense dollars no less. Its deep strike capability being taken up by the F-22A, cruise missiles and eventually the F-35A, at least according to the USAF. Still, the somewhat sudden retirement of the F-117A did present a clear and present capability gap within America's air combat quiver. The F-22A can drop GPS guided 1,000lb bombs, not 2,000lb GPS or laser guided bombs. This is a massive difference when it comes to striking highly defended and physically large or deeply buried strategic targets.

Additionally, the F-22 was not designed primarily as a strike fighter, although it does retain a powerful secondary strike capability, albeit not one congruent with the hard hitting capability of the F-117's 4,500lb bomb load. Also, the F-22's training syllabus focus is not uniformly deep strike oriented, as was the case of the F-117.

Cruise missiles have their limitations, both in their mode of attack, their cost, finite supply and in the size of warhead they can carry. Also, they have existed for decades alongside the F-117 without any talk of them being an adequate replacement for the stealthy attack jet. When it comes to the F-35 as a credible F-117 replacement, the new supersonic stealthy fighter had only first flown a little over a year before the Nighthawk's retirement and rumors were already building that the whole Joint Strike Fighter program would be massively delayed after an already tumultuous design phase. When you factor all this in, the existence of a small force of heavy hitting challenging role was taken up by a clandestine unmanned weapon system (more on this later) as opposed to a manned one, unless it was developed during the 1990's or before.


ORIGINAL PAGE IS OF POOR QUALITY
ORIGINAL PAGE IS OF POOR QUALITY
3
4
aerospaceprojectsreview.com
ORIGINAL PAGE IS OF POOR QUALITY

What about Boeing design from the 1990's?

A friend of the site, and the keeper of fascinating website AerospaceProjectsReview.com, Scott Lowther, has discovered a fairly obscure Joint Strike Fighter design made by Boeing in the mid 1990s, one of many that were made at the beginning of the program by multiple manufacturers. This design closely resembles the shape of the aircraft captured in Texas and Kansas. Known as model 988-122, this manned flying wing design may end up having some connection with the recent spottings as such an aircraft could have been born as some sort of JSF/JAST demonstrator that may have taken a different path after its risk reduction and technological proof of concept goals were met. Could this aircraft, that began as a JSF design, end up partially replacing the F-117? We just don't know but the resemblance is intriguing.

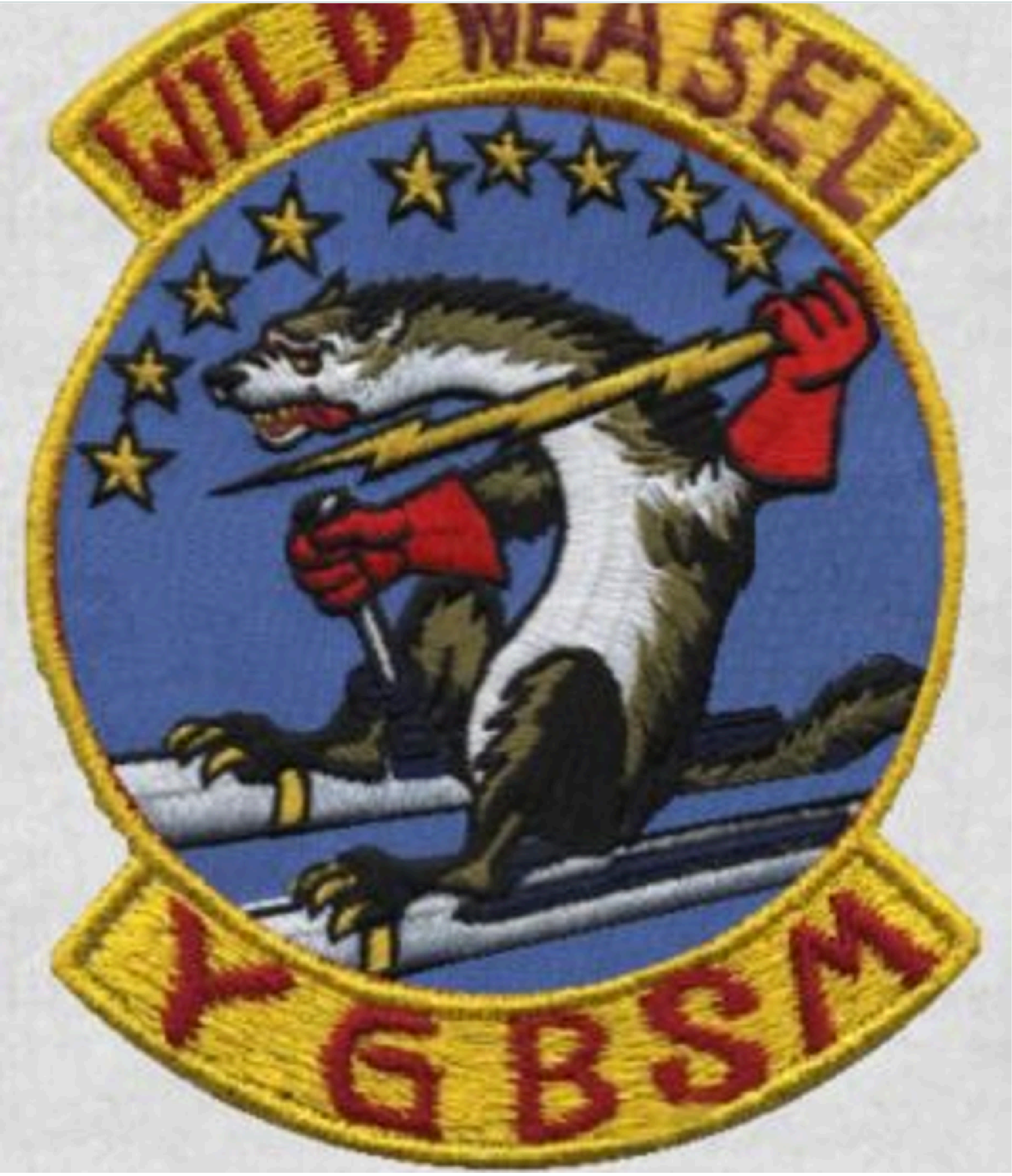
A Stealthy Wild Weasel For Kicking Down The Enemy's Door?

NAVAIR "owns" the electronic attack capability for the entire US air combat fleet via the vanishing EA-6B Prowler and the ever more prevalent EA-18G Growler. The abrupt retirement of the USAF's EF-111 "Sparkvark" in the late 1990s, an aircraft many have said was far superior to the EA-6B Prowler that replaced it (sort of) and had huge room for upgrades, seemed strange as the Air Force was handing over a powerful and ever more necessary capability. Although Air Force crews would man a portion of the Prowler fleet, it did seem strange at the time that such an arrangement was acceptable to the USAF, a service that usually fights to the death when it comes to keeping key that was focused on getting "first day of war" assets, such as the B-2 and cruise missiles, in and out of a missile engagement zone in one piece?

Maybe the Air Force, or even the Navy, took the A-12 concept and stripped the heay carrier requirement from it and loaded it with jamming equipment, high speed anti-radiation missiles and smart weapons. In such a configuration, a stealthy flying wing would not simply be able to provide pinpoint jamming of threatening radar radars, much in the same vein as the hypothetical TR-3A, but it could also get close enough to the hostile emitter to destroy it and its associated air defense/SAM site forever and in full.

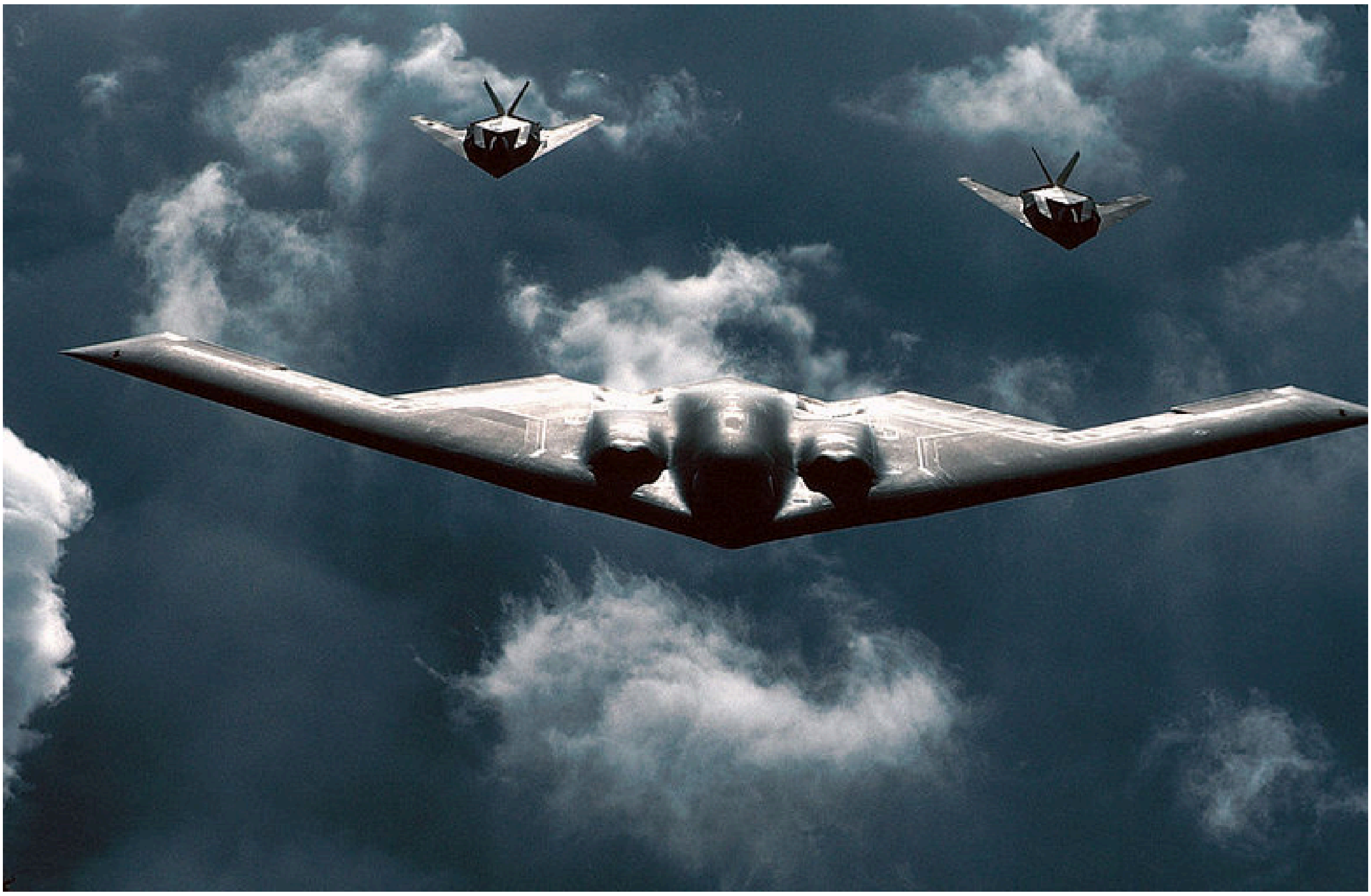
This is known as destruction of enemy air defenses (DEAD), and nowadays it can be done from tens of miles away using glide bombs such as the small diameter bomb (SBD) and wind corrected munitions dispenser (WCMD), but two decades ago this technology was not available.

This meant an aircraft would have to get close to the threatening radar in order to kill it, or simply "suppress" it by firing a AGM-88 high speed anti radiation missile (HARM), which often allowed the radar to live to fight another day. The lack of being able to get safely close enough to actually destroy capable SAM sites is a great reason for developing and deploying stealthy aircraft equipped with sensitive electronic service emitters. In other words, a stealthy wild weasel and tactical jamming aircraft could pinpoint the location of a threatening radar, jam it and then fly close enough too it to be able to drop a guided munition om it without offering the enemy air defense system an engagement quality firing solution. If such a system did this enough during the opening hours of an air war, it could open up a "sanitized" corridor for un-stealthy combat aircraft, like the F-16 or F/A-18, to barrel through.

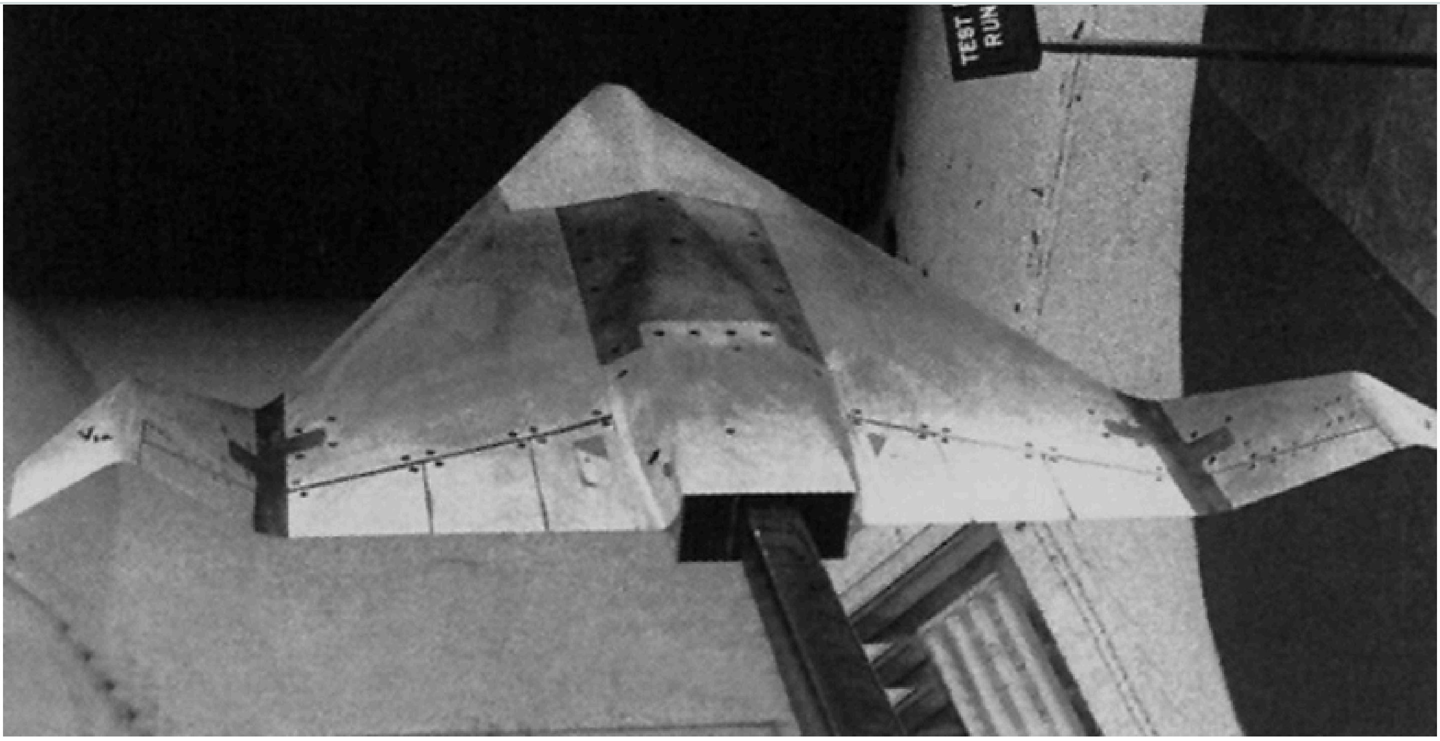


A stealthy flying wing "Wild Weasel," modeled on the A-12/Sneaky Pete, or a more contemporary design like the Boeing model 988-122, would have been on hell of a "silver bullet" asset to have when "kicking down the door" of an advanced enemy with a quality integrated air defense systems (IADS).

force more than ever, it may be time to declassify such an aircraft so that it can begin operating more seamlessly with the majority of America's air power fleet. None the less, it makes sense that if you are going to only have a small cadre of manned stealthy armed tactical aircraft, you might as well make them very good at destroying the radars that have such a hard time seeing them so that other less stealthy assets can begin making a toehold into enemy territory. Such an aircraft would have been en even better, albeit a more advanced friend to the F-117 than the TR-3A, and if it could dynamically snipe SAM sites it could most likely also drop a 2,000lb JDAM, a capability which would have allowed the USAF to feel more comfortable retiring the F-117 fleet before the end of their service lives.



Shadowy manned aircraft, murky conclusions...



In the end, the idea that the all the services, including SOCOM and even the CIA, overlooked the ability to fly deep into enemy airspace and loiter while recording, tracking and electronically listening to anything of interest until unmanned technology improved enough to make it work is a bit ridiculous. Tacit Blue was a massive success, and yes its design influenced the B-2 and the YF-23 to a large degree, but those were aircraft with very different missions than the original BSAX concept. So what came in the twenty plus years between Tacit Blue's last flight and the arrival of the bat-winged stealthy RQ-170 Sentinel drone?

Logic dictates that a TR-3A Black Manta like aircraft, one that could eventually even be adapted for multiple uses, and for multiple customers, was at least tested and/or built in small numbers. Even a small fleet of a couple dozen aircraft, to be used for the highest priorities of missions, could have been a major force multiplier and thus a worthy investment by the DoD and/or the CIA. Additionally, the fact that after Desert Storm Lockheed offered the USAF a reconnaissance version of the proven F-117, and it was flatly turned down by the USAF and Congress, even though the mission was clearly a huge capability gap, seemed strange then and seems even stranger now in retrospect. To think that we built the F-117 in the early 1980's, and the only other tactical manned stealthy aircraft to see even limited operational service after it was the F-22, some 20 years later, is preposterous.

Then there is the A-12 Avenger, and its Sneaky Pete/Cold Pigeon/Model 100 forerunners that all share a striking resemblance to these mysterious aircraft. Could General Dynamics have produced its "flying Dorito" in some form and we are just seeing for a program that is about to be declassified, or it could have also been indicative of the aircraft's design and mission. I was told years ago that the A-12, with its straight tailing edge, was highly reflective when viewed perpendicularly from behind and from the front, so the aircraft would fly its target routes slightly banking at all times, as not to give a continuous return to any single radar station. Whether this is indeed true or not is not clear, but it is interesting that these flying wings seem to be frolicking though the skies in a similar manner as what may have been required to maintain stealth on the battlefield.

We know that the days of manned combat aircraft are slowly coming to an end, especially for those missions that require aircraft to operate deep inside enemy territory. If indeed this aircraft is manned, and is a size synonymous with a tactical aircraft, it would be of little surprise that it is now emerging from the classified world as its years of viability are most likely coming to an end.

Are these aircraft the much rumored but never disclosed, penetrating and persistent stealth surveillance aircraft, the manned missing link between the BSAX and the RQ-170, and even to some degree the rumored high-flying and stealthy RQ-180 strategic operations?

Then there is the possibility that it is an interim, albeit lower density partial replacement for the F-117, one that is becoming less relevant now that the F-35A is slowly making progress towards initial operating capability (IOC) and unmanned deep strike systems are on the horizon (or more likely already here). Finally, could this machine be a stealthy "wild weasel," built to not just to suppress and jam enemy radar sites but to destroy them long before the age of miniaturized GPS guided glide bombs and other standoff weapons. An aircraft whose clandestine existence may be less than a top priority now that the F-22 provides a similar, if not more potent capability DEAD capability.

Then there is the question of the aircraft's potential owners. Is this aircraft owned and operated by the USAF, Navy or maybe a sub-service unit within SOCOM? What about the CIA? They had the U-2, then the Blackbird, and now the RQ-170 Sentinel, but what came in between the 60's Blackbird and the 2000's Sentinel?

Finally, is this aircraft actually unmanned or not of a tactical size at all? Maybe it's a prototype for the upcoming Long Range Strike-Bomber (LRS-B), or a shadowy tactical

We will explore all these possibilities deeply in part two of this expansive essay. In the meantime keep your eyes looking up at the sky, maybe you too will spot one of America's secretive flying triangles carving its way across the stratosphere...

Tyler Rogoway is a defense journalist and photographer that edits the website Foxtrot Alpha for Jalopnik.com You can reach Tyler with story ideas or direct comments regarding this or any other defense topic via the email address Tyler@Jalopnik.com

Photo credit via Steve Douglass, Dean Musckett, Jeff Templin- Spotter's Photos. The rest are via manufacturer release, public archives, DoD or available in the public domain. Any photos marked "Foxtrot Alpha" belong to the website and the writer. Renderings Jason Torchinsky/Jalopnik. Special thanks to Jim Cooke for the illustration.

119 COMMENT(S)

RECOMMENDED

Tragic Details About Allstate's Mayhem Guy

The Best iPhone 17 Cases On The Market For Under $30

Hyundai Workers Walk Out After Trump's Absurd Request

This Popular Motorcycle Brand Makes Surprisingly Terrible Bikes